

Judiciary Committee

Public Testimony of the CT Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

S.B. 13: *An Act Concerning Fair Treatment of Incarcerated Women*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For nearly forty-five years, CWEALF has provided legal education and legal advocacy services to individuals about family law and civil rights issues, many of whom seek guidance about divorce, child support, alimony and custody. CWEALF is also a leading advocate for policy solutions that advance women's economic security and promote bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom.

We urge the committee to support S.B. 13: *An Act Concerning Fair Treatment of Incarcerated Women* to take important steps to protect the dignity and safety of women who are incarcerated.

Women are the fastest growing prison population in the United States. Since 1980, the number of women in prison increased at a rate 50% higher than men.¹ Two thirds of incarcerated women are women of color, and the majority of that population is also low-income. Unlike men, women in jails are often primary caregivers to young children: 79% of women in jails are mothers and 5% are pregnant when they are incarcerated.²

Women often enter prison or jail in vulnerable situations. Eighty-six percent of incarcerated report that they experienced sexual violence at some point in their life, roughly four times the rate of women in the U.S. at large.

Once incarcerated, women must navigate systems and policies designed for men. Jails are often poorly equipped to address the unique challenges women face while incarcerated. In Connecticut, women are not protected by state law against restraints or shackling during transportation between facilities and childbirth.

Women also do not receive necessary feminine hygiene products free of charge, though women often do not have the finances necessary to purchase products. This forces women to go without critical feminine hygiene and sanitary products for days at a time. Current

¹ The Sentencing Project. 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/women/>

² Vera Institute of Justice. Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform. 2016. Retrieved from: https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report/legacy_downloads/overlooked-women-and-jails-report-updated.pdf

state law also does not ensure that women receive adequate visitation with their children, or protect women's privacy when showering or using the bathroom.

Currently, 936 women are incarcerated at York Correctional Facility, Connecticut's only female prison. Administrative directives, not state law, dictate many policies and services provided to women at York. Therefore, any directive that currently ensures the safety or dignity of women may cease to continue with a new executive administration.

Women who are incarcerated deserve to live with dignity, respect and the assurance that the state will protect their safety, regardless of the current administration. Senate Bill No. 13 takes critical steps to preserve the dignity of incarcerated women. Specifically, S.B. 13 will end the practice of shackling women while they are pregnant, in labor or delivery or in the postpartum period. It will also establish family-centric visitation policies that provide incarcerated mothers with children aged 18 and under with frequent and convenient visitation and access to child-friendly visiting areas.

As a state, we must respect the human rights of all women. We urge the Committee and state lawmakers to support S.B. 13 this session to protect the dignity and safety of women who are incarcerated.