



Members of the Correction Advisory Committee,

My name is Alicia Strong, I am the co-director of CT People's Survival Programs, a New Britain-based grassroots organization dedicated to support services and community organizing alongside people most impacted by social inequities. I am writing in strong support of permanently closing Osborn Correctional Institution. Since it was opened in 1963 the facility has had numerous serious health and safety issues. These issues not only impact the wellbeing of incarcerated individuals, but also the correctional staff and surrounding community.

For decades incarcerated individuals and community members have underscored the severe issues plaguing the prison. In the prison's first four decades of operations, residents living around the prison discovered groundwater contamination that impacted their access to clean water. Throughout the 2000s the water at Osborn became notorious. Individuals have shared that even the dogs brought into the facility were not allowed to drink the water. Multiple investigations and lawsuits uncovered exposure to harmful chemicals including PCBs and asbestos. In the last 10 years, the facility has had multiple water system failures and lacked air conditioning during the harsh Connecticut summers.

Osborn Correctional Institution is home to many incarcerated individuals, including those who are elderly and ill. The chronic overcrowding and lack of maintenance over the last 60 years is an issue the Department of Corrections can no longer ignore. The conditions are a humanitarian crisis and the prison should be closed immediately. Included with this testimony is some research we conducted regarding the aforementioned problems. Thank you for your time and I hope you will consider closing the facility for good.

Best Regards,

Alicia Strong
Co-Director, CT People's Survival Programs

Osborn Correctional Institution: A History of Aging Infrastructure, Environmental Harm, and Ongoing Concerns

Opened in 1963 as Connecticut Correctional Institution–Somers, later renamed Osborn Correctional Institution, the facility was built to replace Wethersfield State Prison and operated for decades as Connecticut's maximum-security prison. Located in Somers, Connecticut, Osborn has remained one of the state's largest correctional facilities, housing more than 1,100 incarcerated people today. After more than six decades of operation, the prison continues to rely on infrastructure designed in an earlier era, before modern standards for climate control, environmental protection, and accessibility were established.

The history of Osborn's infrastructure challenges extends beyond recent concerns about heat, water outages, and building deterioration. For surrounding communities and incarcerated people, environmental hazards connected to the facility have been a longstanding issue.

Groundwater Contamination and Community Exposure

One of the earliest documented environmental concerns connected to Osborn involved groundwater contamination from the prison's dry-cleaning operations. In 1986, tetrachloroethylene, also known as perchloroethylene or PCE, a chemical solvent commonly used in dry-cleaning, was discovered in the well water supply serving the Rye Hill Circle area near the prison.

The contamination was linked to the prison's former dry-cleaning facility, which used PCE until approximately 1993. Although the Department of Correction stopped using the contaminated well, nearby residents were not immediately notified of the potential risk. Later investigations found that toxic chemicals had entered neighborhood groundwater supplies as early as 1977, with contamination levels peaking around 1993.

Residents organized in response, and by 1994 community members in the Rye Hill Circle area protested concerns about groundwater pollution and the lack of transparency surrounding the contamination. Studies indicated that residents may have been exposed to PCE in their drinking water for approximately 16 years.

This history remains an important example of how environmental risks associated with correctional facilities can impact not only incarcerated people, but also surrounding communities.

Aging Infrastructure and Repeated Water System Failures

Osborn's aging infrastructure has continued to create challenges for both incarcerated people and facility operations. In 2004, an underground water main break caused significant disruption at the prison, highlighting vulnerabilities in the facility's aging water system. More recent water main failures have resulted in interruptions to drinking water access, sanitation systems, and basic facility operations, requiring emergency measures such as bottled water distribution and portable sanitation facilities.

These repeated failures have raised concerns about whether the state's aging correctional infrastructure is capable of safely supporting the needs of the people housed there.

Environmental Contamination Inside the Facility

In addition to groundwater concerns, Osborn has faced allegations and legal challenges related to environmental hazards inside the prison. During renovation planning, PCB contamination was identified in portions of the facility beginning in 2011. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), chemicals historically used in building materials and electrical equipment, have been linked to serious health risks.

Incarcerated people later filed legal claims alleging prolonged exposure to contaminated drinking water, asbestos, and PCBs. The state denied wrongdoing, and portions of the litigation were ultimately resolved through settlement in 2024. However, the cases brought broader attention to the challenges of maintaining older correctional facilities built before modern environmental and health standards.

Extreme Heat and Climate Concerns

Because Osborn was constructed in the 1960s, many housing units were built without central air conditioning. As summers become hotter, incarcerated people have reported dangerous indoor temperatures, with some housing units reaching above 90 degrees.

Heat concerns have become a recurring issue at Osborn and other Connecticut prisons. In 2025, Connecticut's Correction Ombuds raised concerns that inadequate heat protections could create constitutional issues if sufficient mitigation measures were not maintained. The Department of Correction has responded with cooling equipment and heat mitigation strategies, but the facility's design limitations continue to make temperature control a challenge.

Medical Care, Sanitation, and Oversight Concerns

Beyond environmental and infrastructure issues, Osborn has been the subject of lawsuits, investigative reporting, advocacy campaigns, and government oversight regarding medical care, sanitation, and prison conditions. Advocates and incarcerated people have repeatedly raised concerns about delays in medical treatment, facility cleanliness, and the impact that deteriorating infrastructure has on daily living conditions.

These concerns reflect broader challenges facing Connecticut's aging prison system, where many facilities were constructed decades ago and require significant investment to meet current standards.

Osborn Today

Despite these challenges, Osborn remains a major component of Connecticut's correctional system. The facility operates educational programs, medical services, addiction treatment programs, hospice volunteer programs, and one of the state's largest correctional industries operations.

However, Osborn also represents the broader consequences of maintaining an aging prison system without sufficient modernization. Its history includes decades of environmental concerns, infrastructure failures, and ongoing questions about whether correctional facilities can provide safe and healthy living conditions for incarcerated people and surrounding communities.

Osborn Correctional Institution: Key Facts

Opened: 1963

Location: Somers, Connecticut

Security Level: Level 3 Medium Security

History: Former maximum-security prison and death row facility

Current Role: One of Connecticut's largest correctional institutions

Major Historical Concerns

- Groundwater contamination linked to PCE from prison dry-cleaning operations
- Community protests in Rye Hill Circle regarding contaminated drinking water
- Failure to promptly notify nearby residents of contamination risks
- Repeated underground water main failures
- Aging buildings lacking modern cooling systems
- Extreme summer heat inside housing units
- PCB and asbestos contamination litigation
- Ongoing concerns about medical care, sanitation, and infrastructure

Timeline

1963: Connecticut Correctional Institution–Somers opens as a maximum-security prison.

1977: Later studies indicate toxic chemicals from prison operations may have begun entering nearby groundwater supplies.

1986: PCE contamination discovered in well water near the Rye Hill Circle neighborhood.

1993: Prison dry-cleaning operations using PCE end; contamination levels peak around this period.

1994: Local residents protest groundwater contamination and lack of notification.

2004: Underground water main break disrupts prison operations and highlights infrastructure vulnerabilities.

2011: PCB contamination identified in portions of the facility during renovation planning.

2016–2024: Litigation continues regarding allegations of contaminated water, asbestos, and PCB exposure.

2024–2026: Continued concerns about heat, water failures, and aging infrastructure lead to increased public scrutiny and calls for systemic improvements.

Osborn Correctional Institution's history demonstrates that prison conditions are not only shaped by individual policies, but also by decades of infrastructure decisions, environmental practices, and the state's responsibility to maintain safe conditions for incarcerated people and surrounding communities.