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Title:

Organization or Agency: Incarcerated at MacDougall

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NA

Testimony:

Much of today's justice reform efforts have centered around “at-risk youth” who, unfortunately, made grave mistakes in their young lives. Less discussed, but equally urgent, is the growing elderly prison population—an issue some states have begun to address through elderly parole reforms. To date, states like California, New York, and Massachusetts have all implemented elderly parole programs that seek to afford a meaningful opportunity for release to an elderly population that has aged out of crime.

Connecticut, as the state with the oldest average prisoner in the country, should follow their lead. Doing so would not only alleviate the unnecessarily high cost associated with incarcerating older people, but it would be a needed step towards reconciling decades of unjust over-sentencing practices and redirecting taxpayer dollars toward genuine public safety measures.

In the state of Connecticut, it costs 62 thousand dollars a year to incarcerate one person, and that is a conservative estimate. Most people, as they age, require additional health care. That fact is compounded by the health issues that arise in a long-term institutional setting like prison, where health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, hypertension, high cholesterol, and cancer are not only more common, but more likely to afflict people at a younger age. Nevertheless, as a person ages, the cost to incarcerate them increases. By the time a prisoner reaches the age of 50, it costs 124 thousand dollars a year to incarcerate them, double that of the normal cost. Elderly parole programs are not only fiscally responsible, but they are common sense when one considers the millions spent to incarcerate a population that no longer poses a risk to public safety.

Generally, people tend to age out of crime. Most elderly prisoners today were over-sentenced in the 1990s, receiving harsh sentences derived from truth in sentencing (TIS) practices, the, now, debunked super-predator theory, War on Poverty initiatives, and other political agendas that laid the foundation for our mass incarceration nation. It makes sense, then, that the average age of an incarcerated individual in Connecticut is 40 years old, accounting for the thousands of young people who fell victim to these practices that began in the 1990s and extended into the 2000s. As of late June 2025, there are 2,735 prisoners who are considered “elderly” in the Connecticut Department of Corrections. I am one of these nearly 3,000 individuals. Despite no longer posing a risk to society, we remain trapped by unjust sentencing practices that are now commonly understood to have been misguided and specific to the particular political landscape of the ‘90s. But all has not been lost in our old age.

With age comes wisdom, remorse, change, and determination. We have not merely “aged” out of crime, but we have done the work to ensure that we will never commit harm again. And in that work—of reflection, accountability, and transformation—we have become desperate to help those that need it most. I am ready to reenter society and I am confident that my doing so would be a huge benefit to my community. While incarcerated, I have spent the great majority of my time growing mentally and spiritually, engaging in programming like Alternatives to Violence, VOICES, Good Intentions, Bad Choices, and Prison of Peace. I also work with “chronic prisoners,” folks who are consistently in trouble, and many younger prisoners see me as a mentor who they can come to when they have problems. I am aware, then, of how my actions and consistency, or lack thereof, sets an example for others. By taking the tools and values that I've learned while incarcerated and instilling them in the young brothers of my community, I can affect real change, preventing members of today's youth from falling victim to the same fate that I and so many others did decades ago. Releasing us, elders, represents an investment in creating safer communities. But in prolonging our incarceration, it is taxpayers' pockets and our health and wellbeing that are so thoughtlessly and needlessly jeopardized.

Prisons are not designed to house the elderly. While Connecticut taxpayers waste their money on housing and supposedly caring for prisoners, these funds do not actually translate to proper care or treatment for the elderly population. Daily, I watch as elderly men pass by, hunched over their walkers or rolling by in wheelchairs. Many of us are in poor health, ailing with preventable conditions that nevertheless require proper medical treatment. The elderly population has needs that prisons are not capable of meeting.

The 8th Amendment of the United States Constitution requires prison officials to provide adequate medical care to incarcerated individuals. A denial of the most basic healthcare needs constitutes “cruel and unusual punishment.” The lack of care and compassion shown to elderly prisoners, coupled with the deplorable conditions of confinement—such as poor air and water quality, processed foods, and excessive sensory deprivation—are in total violation of our constitutional rights. Quite simply, Connecticut's prison system does not have the capacity nor the desire to treat us well and with dignity as we advance into old age.

Currently, thousands of people sit in prison, serving sentences based in the political rhetoric of now-debunked theories. We, the elderly, who rot away in facilities that were never meant to house us, let alone care for us, for so long, are the vestiges of this bygone era. We are living proof that not only are our prisons incapable of protecting their most vulnerable captives, but that our justice system is not guided by common sense or a real pursuit of public safety. Connecticut faces a moral question, then, that is largely practical in nature. Will it continue to waste hundreds of millions of taxpayers' hard-earned money to house and inadequately care for a population who, having aged out of their crimes and demonstrating immense growth and transformation, are armed to further public safety, rather than detracting from it? Or will it enact policies that will save its residents money and make the state safer? The answer should be obvious.