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Title:

Organization or Agency: Incarcerated in CT DOC

Topic: Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

Testimony:

Due to the especially punitive laws targeting young people in the 1990s—including the super predator movement, mandatory minimums, and over-sentencing practices—a generation of mothers watched as their children matured and became men behind bars. Beyond our original sentences, which separated us physically from our loved ones, cumulative sanctions accrue over the course of one's confinement. From hard mattresses and echoing hallways that interrupt our sleep, to disrespectful and careless staff, to the constant surveillance we live under, prison does not just punish us by physically removing us from our past lives; it worsens our conditions to the point that a sort of self-imposed emotional isolation is the only tool we have at our disposal to protect our loved ones from the horrors of our experience. Ultimately, our relationships bear the cost, incapacitating our rehabilitation by destroying ties with our parents, siblings, children and friends.

Even as we try our best to hide the everyday violence of our incarceration, phone calls, letters and visits do little to give loved ones peace of mind about how we are doing. Many of us lie to shield them from the severity of our conditions and mistreatment in an attempt to prevent them from helplessly worrying. During phone calls, it is a common practice for us to overstate our condition, answering questions with platitudes like—"I'm good," "Everything's good—" while simultaneously deflecting their focus on our well-being.

A question like "How are you doing?" will be answered with "I'm good. What's up with you? How's things at home?"

We are constantly seeking 'outs,' ways of quickly changing the subject and putting the question back onto the questioner, taking the focus off of ourselves. Anyone who is incarcerated would agree: we could easily spend an entire conversation complaining—about how "safety" and "security" is the guise under which correctional officers oppress us while doing very little work themselves, and how, as a result, we all bear witness to each other's trauma, to those who are traumatized and can't cope, turning to substances, engaging in physical altercations, and in some cases, committing suicide and murder. But we don't say any of that because at some point, we realize that doing so causes more emotional harm to our loved ones, than therapeutic good for us. At least, that's the reason we tell ourselves.

Family members often avoid nostalgic encounters, too. Reminiscing is depressing. Inevitably, then, we don't just stop talking about the past with our loved ones, we begin to forget our own memories as well. While this might stave off the immediate pain that reflecting on the past brings up, this forgetting ultimately strains our relationships and limits our capacity for rehabilitation. How can we rehabilitate and grow if all of our ties to our former selves have been amputated, if we exist in isolation from the upbringing and memories, both fond and painful, that shaped us into the people we are?

While visits, mail, and phone calls—ties to the outside world—are available over the course of one's incarceration, there is no existing structure in place for integration into our life, especially for those who have completed a lengthy sentence. The time of confinement itself is enough of a punishment, but the cumulative sanctions, modes of punishment that extend beyond one's deprivation of freedom, added to already imposed sentences cause nothing short of psychological trauma.

And that trauma is not solely felt by the incarcerated person themselves. The torture that is inflicted on the incarcerated is shared through a systemic culture of degradation. Loved ones wait for phone calls

which could, at any point, be dropped. Lockdowns and closures make it so that someone might drive hours to see you for an only hour-long visit, just to be denied entry to the facility upon arrival. Once at the facility, some officers treat visitors unprofessionally, being rude, hostile, and even vulgar towards our loved ones. Visitors are subjected to metal detectors, pat-downs, and waiting in tiny, cramped rooms for a visit that may, at the last moment, be denied. Mailed-in kids' drawings, birthday cards, photos, and letters can be rejected for any reason, with it taking weeks or months for the mail to be returned to the sender. These are just some of the many methods facilities use to deter family members from remaining an active support system for those incarcerated.

Prison is designed to break us. Mental stress causes physical stress which causes the deterioration of one's physical health. And vice versa. Most people come out of prison a different person than when they came in. Upon release, formerly incarcerated people and their families have to readjust to one another and relearn each other, beginning, in some ways, an entirely new relationship. A mother faces the burden of realizing that the person she raised since infancy has changed in deep and irreversible ways, and prison is the reason why. This process of relearning on the outside can be just as gruelling as the process of concealing and coping on the inside. Both constitute psychological trauma that can bring about mental deterioration, PTSD, anxiety, and depression, amongst others conditions. This infliction of accumulated trauma equates to cruel and unusual punishment, leaving the family—if one is lucky to have any left when returning home—not the state or the Department of Corrections, to pick up the pieces of a broken individual.

Years-long sentences are misleading. "20 years" rolls off the tongue, but the toll of being housed in an unnatural environment for one year, one month, one day is innumerable. The pain multiplies, exponentially, transferring onto our loved ones and by attempting to shield them from the horrors of our experience, our own pain only grows. And the pain doesn't end when the sentence does. It just escapes confinement with our release, demanding to finally be recognized.