



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

SENTENCING COMMISSION

Testimony of Alex Tsarkov and Professor Sarah Russell before the Judiciary Committee on SB 948, An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission with Respect to Misdemeanor Sentences

Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Rebimbas, and members of the Judiciary Committee. For the record, my name is Alex Tsarkov and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission. With me is Professor Sarah Russell from Quinnipiac University School of Law, and member of the Sentencing Commission. We are here to testify in favor of SB 948, *An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission with Respect to Misdemeanor Sentences*.

We would first like to give you some brief background about the Sentencing Commission. We are a permanent commission created seven years ago, consisting of all the stakeholders in Connecticut's criminal justice system. Our membership includes four judges; the Chief State's Attorney; the Chief Public Defender; the Victim Advocate; the commissioners of Correction and Emergency Services and Public Protection; community activists interested in the criminal justice system; the chair of the Board of Pardons and Paroles; municipal police chiefs; the undersecretary of the Office of Policy and Management's Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division; as well as others vitally engaged in the criminal justice system. Our work is informed by all the major system stakeholders of the criminal justice system and aims to adhere to the best legal and evidence based research and practices.

The Sentencing Commission recommends the enactment of SB 948, and supported a similar proposal in the last legislative session. This proposal arose from work done by the Sentencing Commission in collaboration with the Connecticut Immigrant Rights Alliance and the Yale Law School Worker and Immigrant Rights Advocacy Clinic. This bill before you would make an important change to the penalty for offenses defined in our state as misdemeanors. This legislation is important given the heavy immigration consequences the current penalty could carry in federal immigration law.

Connecticut non-citizen residents, including lawful permanent residents, sometimes face unexpected and unduly harsh immigration consequences because of the relationship between the state's penal code and federal immigration law. A significant impact arises because the maximum potential sentence for conviction of a class A misdemeanor in Connecticut is one year imprisonment, which under federal immigration law can trigger deportation proceedings and removal from the United States. Furthermore, some federal immigration provisions apply based

on the potential sentence available for the offense rather than based on the actual sentence imposed or time in prison actually served.

In addition, a sentence of one year in jail for some misdemeanor convictions disqualifies Connecticut residents in some vulnerable populations from consideration for certain protections, such as asylum (based on a well-founded fear of persecution in the foreign country), and protection from domestic violence.

Such a sentence also denies immigration judges, in certain cases, discretion to consider mitigating circumstances against deportation, such as long-term residence in the United States or past military service.

This small but important change in the maximum sentence for misdemeanor cases targets two categories of offenses that carry deportation and other immigration consequences. First, under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), a single “crime involving moral turpitude” is a deportable offense if it is committed within five years of entry and punishable by a sentence of a year or more. This basis for deportation depends on whether the offense is “a crime for which a sentence of one year or longer may be imposed,” not the actual length of the sentence imposed. Such a conviction makes a person deportable, but it also makes persons without green cards ineligible for cancellation of removal, an important form of discretionary relief from removal for individuals with longstanding family and community ties to the United States. It thus prevents immigration judges from exercising discretion they would otherwise have to consider the totality of the circumstances in deciding a particular case. A “crime involving moral turpitude” covers a broad array of offenses, including most assault offenses; almost all offenses involving fraud; and almost all offenses involving theft, including petty theft offenses.

Second, the INA classifies as “aggravated felonies” certain offenses that carry a sentence of one year or more, regardless of whether they are misdemeanors under state law or if the sentence imposed is suspended. The “aggravated felony” designation triggers mandatory detention and deportation. The INA’s definition of aggravated felony includes a theft offense (including receipt of stolen property) or burglary offense for which the term of imprisonment is at least one year. *See also Forbes v. Lynch*, 642 F. App’x 29, 30 (2d Cir. 2016) (unpublished) (upholding classification of third-degree larceny under Connecticut law as a theft offense constituting a deportable “aggravated felony”); *United States v. Pacheco*, 225 F. 3d 148 (2d Cir. 2000) (upholding classification of theft of \$10 videogame with one year suspended sentence as “aggravated felony”). A person convicted of an “aggravated felony” is ineligible for nearly all forms of discretionary immigration relief, such as asylum, cancellation of removal, and special protections for certain victims of domestic violence.

SB 948 would not, of course, end immigration enforcement. Those who are unlawfully present in the United States or who have convictions that otherwise make them deportable will still be subject to deportation proceedings. It is important to note that reducing the maximum sentence by one day would not protect from deportation certain people convicted of serious offenses regardless of their sentence. These convictions include offenses related to domestic

violence, violating an order of protection, drug offenses and firearm convictions. In addition, multiple convictions for “crimes involving moral turpitude,” also carry deportation regardless of the maximum penalty for each offense.

Several other states including Nevada, California, Washington, and Oregon have already enacted this modest change in sentencing that ensures appropriate discretion for federal immigration authorities, helps protect certain non-citizens from arbitrary deportations and denial of consideration of individual circumstances.

We thank the Committee for raising this important legislation and urge the Committee’s JOINT FAVORABLE Report.