

To the Members of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission

Testimony supporting expanding voting rights and access for formerly incarcerated individuals and those awaiting trial in detention.

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To the chair of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission, the Honorable Robert J. Devlin, Jr., Vice Chair, John Santa, and the esteemed members of the Commission. I respectfully submit testimony in my role as Director of the Nancy A Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work to express my strong support of your recommendations to expand voting rights and access to formerly incarcerated individuals on parole as well as people in pre-trial detention.

A functioning democracy represents the voices and power of all citizens to have a say in government and the policy decisions it makes. Voting is a basic human right and an important indicator of community health and well-being. When people vote, there are benefits to themselves and their communities, including higher levels of civic participation, stronger connections within communities and better outcomes for the individual voters themselves, including higher levels of “civic health” measured by stronger social connections, better employment and greater community well-being (Kansas Civic Health Foundation, 2016). Voter engagement also reduces the mental health consequences of oppression, increases individual efficacy and provides opportunities to voice opinions, connect with others, and to feel positive about one’s self (Sanders, 2001). As further proof of the power of voting, formerly incarcerated persons who had their voting rights restored in Florida were less likely to return to prison (Florida Parole Commission study, 2010).

Nationally, 6.1 million individuals cannot vote because of a felony conviction, which, like the criminal justice system, disproportionately affects people of color. (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016). In Connecticut, this lack of voting power affects Connecticut’s cities most severely. Since states determine felony voting policy, there is confusion across the country about whether individuals with a felony can vote and examples of severe punishment for those who vote when they are ineligible, e.g., the woman in Texas who was sentenced to five years in prison for voting while on parole. (Flynn, 2018).

The Humphreys Institute not only strongly supports expanding voting rights to those on parole like our neighbors in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire but believes we should follow Vermont and Maine in allowing all citizens to vote. Automatically restoring felony voting rights upon release is a very important, positive step and will help eliminate some of the confusion within Connecticut about who is eligible to vote.

Additionally, we support efforts to ensure that the 4,000 people in pre-trial detention, who have not been convicted, are given the opportunity to vote in all elections via absentee ballots. This is a violation of their rights as citizens and a disservice to their communities. Your proposed study is needed to ensure consistent administration and access to the vote within state detention centers.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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