



DATE: March 15, 2018
TO: Government Administration and Elections Committee
FROM: Julia Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy
RE: HB 5418 AN ACT RESTORING ELECTORAL PRIVILEGES TO FELONY CONVICTS WHO ARE ON PAROLE

Good morning, Senator Flexer, Senator McLachlan, Representative Fox, Representative Devlin, and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

My name is Julia Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy at the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance. The Alliance is Connecticut's statewide association of community nonprofits. Our members deliver essential services to more than half a million people each year and employ almost 14% of Connecticut's workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill No. HB5418: AN ACT RESTORING ELECTORAL PRIVILEGES TO FELONY CONVICTS WHO ARE ON PAROLE

The Alliance supports House Bill No. 5418, which seeks to restore the electoral privileges of convicted felons who have been released from confinement in a correctional institution but who may not have been discharged from parole. We commend the Committee for your efforts to bring forth this important legislation, which has the potential to impact not only the returning citizens outlined in the legislation, but communities across Connecticut.

Connecticut's Community Justice Leadership

It has been common practice in the United States to deem former offenders ineligible to vote, in some cases permanently. Over the last few decades, the general trend has been toward reinstating the right to vote at some point, although this is a state-by-state policy decision.

The citizens of Connecticut are fortunate in that the legislature, Department of Correction, the Judicial Branch, and Governor Malloy, consistently serve as leaders on a national basis, with regard to progressive criminal justice policy. Connecticut has long been considered a national model at the forefront of overarching criminal justice reform for the innovative approaches the state has adopted - including the Second Chance Society Initiative and in terms of best practices and real results, as reflected in national studies. Most criminal justice research focuses on the effectiveness of programs that seek to reduce recidivism by changing offender attitudes and behavior. Reductions in recidivism rates translate to breaking the cycle of crime and poverty that plagues so many communities across the nation.

The proposed legislation continues the efforts of the legislature to build upon past success, maintain momentum of the Second Chance Society Initiative, and provide the tools necessary to ensure that these returning citizens are actively engaged and invested in their reentry process, their families and their communities.

As of January 1, 2018, there were 4,674 citizens of our state who were receiving community supervision from nonprofit providers who contract with the DOC. This is a 13% increase within a two - year period, while the prison population was simultaneously reduced by 13%. Thousands more receive services through providers who contract with CSSD and the Judicial Branch.

Research Indicates Restoration of Civil Rights Reduces Recidivism

Members of the Alliance work to reintegrate former offenders into their communities. Research indicates that restoration of voting and other civil rights, improves upon this process. This process can produce tangible benefits for both the individual and the communities of Connecticut.

There is substantial precedence for passage of HB 5418. In fourteen states and the District of Columbia, felons lose their voting rights only while incarcerated, and receive automatic restoration upon release.

A 2011 study by the Florida Parole Commission¹ found that former offenders whose civil rights had been restored were much less likely to return to prison than others in the released prisoner population.

The report found that 30,672 offenders had their civil rights restored in calendar years 2009 and 2010 combined (including restoration of alien status for a small number of non-citizens). Of those, only 3,406 had committed offenses by May 31, 2011 that resulted in a return to prison or community supervision by the Florida Department of Corrections.

This equates to an 11.1% recidivism rate for ex-felons whose rights were restored, which contrasts with a 2010 FDOC report that found 33.1% of all state prisoners released from 2001 to 2008 reoffended within three years

The Importance of Voting Rights – Impact on Social Justice

The proposed legislation provides the opportunity to reinforce the powerful impact of each returning citizen becoming actively engaged and accountable for their future, the future of their families and their communities.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to testify in support of H.B. No. 5418. Please feel free to contact me with questions or for additional information.

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¹ <https://www.fcor.state.fl.us/docs/reports/2009-2010ClemencyReport.pdf>

² <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>