



DATE: March 10, 2021

TO: Government Administration and Elections Committee

FROM: Julia Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Alliance

RE: HB 5318: An Act Restoring Electoral Privileges to Convicted Felons Who Are on Parole
HB 6578: An Act Concerning Participation in the Electoral Process

Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, Senator Sampson, Representative Mastrofrancesco, 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). The Alliance is the statewide association representing the nonprofit sector. Community nonprofits provide essential services to over half a million individuals and families in Connecticut every year, and employ 14% of Connecticut's workforce, improving the quality of life in communities across the State.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of two bills which consider the impact of the electoral process on people who are involved in the criminal justice system.

HB 5318: An Act Restoring Electoral Privileges to Convicted Felons Who Are on Parole, seeks to restore the electoral privileges of convicted felons who are on parole.

HB 6578: An Act Concerning Participation in The Electoral Process, seeks to accomplish goals in three areas:

1. Restore, without the payment of certain fines, the electoral privileges of convicted felons who are on parole,
2. Codify existing practice, under a memorandum of understanding, regarding voter registration procedures at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and
3. Eliminate registrar-appointed challengers from who may be present in the polling place during a primary or election.

We commend the Committee for raising these important bills. Connecticut has the most stringent disenfranchisement laws in the Northeast and is the only state that prohibits those on parole from participating in the election process. Research indicates that restoration of voting and other civil rights:

- Produces tangible benefits for both the people and their communities
- Reduces disenfranchisement and increases civic engagement, thereby reducing recidivism.

A 2011 study by the Florida Parole Commissionⁱ 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. 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 (FDOC). This equates to an 11.1% recidivism rate for former 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.

In October 2020, The Sentencing Project released a study entitled: Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction. The study explored voting restrictions, and their disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities throughout the United States. As of 2020, an estimated 5.17 million people are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction, a figure that has declined by almost 15 percent since 2016, as states enacted new policies to curtail this practice. There were an estimated 1.17 million people disenfranchised in 1976, 3.34 million in 1996, 5.85 million in 2010, and 6.11 million in 2016. Among the key findings, the report indicated that one in 16 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised, a rate 3.7 times greater than that of non-African Americans. Over 6.2 percent of the adult African American population is disenfranchised compared to 1.7 percent of the non-African American population.

In addition, if prisoners remain citizens and retain their civic status throughout their sentences, then prisoners should be entitled to the most basic of their civil rights - the right to cast a ballot. Disenfranchising this population creates a class of people still subject to state and federal laws, but without a voice in the way they are governed. 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.

Most criminal justice research focuses on the effectiveness of programs that seek to reduce recidivism by changing offender attitudes and behavior. Reductions in recidivism translate to breaking the cycle of crime and poverty. The proposed legislation continues the efforts of the legislature to build on 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.

Community nonprofits in Connecticut work to reintegrate former offenders into their communities. Community Justice providers support justice-involved individuals and their families, as well as survivors of crime. These programs, funded by the Department of Correction and the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch, continue to play an essential role in the ongoing success related to criminal justice reform in Connecticut. According to the January 2021 OPM Monthly Indicators Reportⁱⁱⁱ, community providers are serving approximately 4,000 people in programs which are funded by Department of Corrections – a greater than 30% increase from 2014. Thousands more receive services through providers that contract with the Court Support Services Division of Judicial Branch.

Once again, The Alliance urges the committee to support HB 5318 and HB 6578, which consider the impact of the electoral process on individuals who are involved in the criminal justice system. The ability of the state to ensure continuation of the criminal justice reforms that have positioned Connecticut as a national leader, is greatly dependent on a sustainable system of services, as provided by the nonprofit sector.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues.

Julia Z. Wilcox, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy

JWilcox@ctnonprofitalliance.org

ⁱ State of Florida, Status Report: Restoration of Civil Rights' (RCR) Cases Granted 2009 and 2010

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

ⁱⁱ The Sentencing Project: Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-denied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/>

ⁱⁱⁱ January 2021 OPM Monthly Indicators Report: https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/OPM/CJPPD/CjResearch/MonthlyIndicators/2021-MONTHLY-INDICATOR-REPORTS/MonthlyIndicatorsReport_Jan_-2021.pdf