



The Road to Prison Oversight in Connecticut



An Act Promoting Responsible Oversight, Treatment, and Effective Correctional Transparency

Jointly drafted by the Connecticut Department of Corrections and Stop Solitary Connecticut, S.B. 459 presents a critical opportunity to create independent oversight and codify progress made to date on limiting isolated confinement.

Why Oversight & Accountability?

The recent history of Connecticut's prisons shows the dangers of vesting unchecked power in society's most hidden and least democratic spaces. As a state agency with no public accountability, DOC has repeatedly resorted to inhumane methods of control and punishment.

- 1995 Connecticut builds Northern Correctional Institution, the state's sole supermax facility. For a quarter century, Northern's unrelenting isolation, harsh physical environment, and institutional culture of violence will fall especially hard on people of color and those with mental illness. These effects ripple throughout DOC.
- 2005 In response to a federal lawsuit, DOC enters a settlement agreement to remove people with serious mental illness from Northern and to create outside monitoring.
- 2008 The settlement agreement expires, ending outside monitoring. A final audit of DOC practices finds substantial non-compliance with the agreement, including the abusive and excessive use of restraints.
- 2009 Connecticut's legislature dissolves the office of the prison Ombudsman. That office, while deeply flawed and underfunded, was the sole watchdog for the prison system.
- 2010 Without oversight, DOC fills Northern to maximum capacity, re-incarcerating people whom outside monitors had previously deemed too mentally ill to withstand Northern's harsh environment. Denied social contact and compassionate care, many will spend years in a downward cycle of mental illness and punishment.
- 2019 The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture voices "alarm" at DOC's practices, which include "in-cell restraints," whereby DOC shackles and chains people in locked cells, typically for 72 hours and sometimes up to a week at a time. The Rapporteur observes that "there seems to be a State-sanctioned policy aimed at purposefully inflicting severe pain or suffering, physical or mental, which may well amount to torture."
- 2021 Governor Lamont closes Northern but vetoes the PROTECT Act. Executive Order 21-1 increases time out of cell but fails to address critical issues, including abusive restraints and independent oversight.
- 2022 DOC continues to subject people to punitive isolation, needless lockdowns, and abusive restraints, including in response to mental health crises. Practices that festered at Northern now pervade the system.

In Connecticut, the burdens of incarceration fall most heavily on Black and brown communities, who make up more than two-thirds of the prison population. In 2020 and 2021, Black and brown people accounted for more than 80% of people subjected to isolation and abusive restraints.

By creating an independent Corrections Ombuds and Corrections Advisory Committee with directly impacted people, the PROTECT ACT 2022 increases transparency to promote the safety, humanity, and efficacy of Connecticut correctional institutions. With oversight and democratic accountability, Connecticut can finally leave its past behind.

PASS THE PROTECT ACT