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Connecticut Sentencing Commission
Honorable Joseph M. Shortall, Mike Lawlor, Andrew J. Clark, & all members

November 28, 2012

RE: Public Hearing on 2013 Legislative Proposals

Dear Members of the Sentencing Commission,

I would like to begin by thanking all who have contributed in putting this meeting together; as those of us that are dealing with these issues in our lives rarely have the opportunity to voice our views and/or opinions on how these matters affect us personally.

My husband is currently incarcerated, and has been since 2004. He is serving the remainder of a fifteen-year sentence which was imposed on him at the age of 16 years of age. Prior to "violating" his parole with a re-arrest, he had been incarcerated for eight years, from the age of 16-24. By the time he was 26, he was back in jail, to serve the remainder of his sentence, and was sentenced to 20 years for the "new" crime. Although I have my issues on the current sentencing of my husband, (*my husband's rights to adequate counsel were violated, not to mention that a PSI was NEVER done on a case where a man is sentenced to 20 years of their life in prison*); I will try to focus on the matter at hand, and that is the sentencing that took place when he was just 16 years old.

My husband comes from a broken home, a home where he experienced poverty, a mother addicted to drugs and alcohol, and a grandmother whom did the best she could to raise several grandchildren. He was more fortunate than most, however, because he had a dad in his life. A dad that did the best he could to show his son what it was to be a productive citizen, and taught him valuable lessons that he still carries with him to this day. At the age of 16, however, my husband's father, the only positive role model he had, was viciously murdered, and ripped away from my husband. A tragedy that I believe is what caused my husband to make a mistake that would cost him his entire youth. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison for a robbery, which although a horrible act, did not cause the loss of life, or physical injury.

When they come from limited resources, often times, and a defendant is faced with a choice. Take your *case to trial*, (*with a public defender that is working over 100 other cases, and truly cannot humanly give your case the attention it needs*) where you face 60 years if convicted; or take a plea bargain in which you waive all of your rights, and take 15 years in prison.

As adults we can all look back on our teenage years and think of a lot of things that we did, that I'm sure we would not make those same choices given the life experience and maturity we have today. I would like to say that teenagers deal with tragedies, and everyday complications in a very different way than even a young adult in their early twenties would. That became apparently clear to me as a youth counselor for troubled teens in DCF care while working at the Marshall House. (An emergency shelter for DCF runaways, that I had the pleasure of working in until the program was terminated.)

When incarcerated, defendants are sentenced to the custody of the Department of **Corrections**. Why call it the Department of *Corrections* if there is no **correction** going on? It is merely a punishment. A jail cell or dorm where inmates spend their time thinking, sleeping, some go to school, or a program. But what is being done to correct the behavior or thinking that put that person in that predicament to begin with? What is being done to show them that

there are options rather than a life of crime, that there is something to look forward to, and something worth making a change for?

This brings me to the matter of Inmate Visitation, and then to the matter of the Certificates of Rehabilitation (as all of these matters go hand in hand). As far as the inmate visits go, I believe they make a world of difference not only for the inmate to stay connected to his/her family, but for the family that is now suddenly dealing with the loss of a parent, and life partner. The children are often having to explain to their friends why their daddy is not around, or even lie about where he is out of shame. So the fact that they can still have that time to spend with their parent is a big deal. At the beginning of my husband's sentence, we were allowed to hold hands during the visits. Now there is a big painted red line going across the table which divides his side of the table, and ours. When you are refrained from physical contact, you become inhuman in my opinion. I have noticed what a significant difference it makes to be able to hold my husband's hand, even if it was just for a little while. We are allowed a brief embrace at the beginning and end of a visit; which is hard when you're missing that person so much, sometimes children don't understand, and want to hug daddy just a couple more minutes. Or they want to sit on their daddy's lap like they would do at home. Sometimes mother's will lie to their small children, and tell them daddy is away at college, or some other story. But when they go there, see the barb wire, and all the restrictions, what else can be said?

A friend of mine has a son incarcerated in Massachusetts. She tells me that they have vending machines, and microwaves in their visiting room. They can share a meal with the inmate. There are toys for children to play with, and they are even allowed to play board games together at a visit, take photos, and walk around the visiting room. These things are purchased with a pre-paid card that the visitor loads with funds prior to entering the visiting room. It makes for a time of bonding; parents with children, spouses with their significant other. It promotes a reason for that inmate to want to come home, and enjoy those small things like a board game with family, and a meal together. It strengthens the bond that will make them think twice before committing a crime that will tear them away from their loved ones again. Especially since at a time of incarceration, an inmate learns the value of who is truly there for them, and has their best interest at heart. Those inmates that don't get visits feel abandoned by family, and therefore feel like their fellow inmates are the only family they have. Some become accustomed to an incarcerated lifestyle.

Regarding 'Certificates of Rehabilitation', I am in favor of anything that will promote the self-reliance of an inmate returning to society. Often times, not only did they pay for the crime by serving time in prison, but serve another punishment when they are denied employment and a safe place to live upon their release. Without those basic necessities, how can someone be expected to thrive, and want to make positive changes? It is important that if someone is sentenced to prison time, they end their punishment the day they are released. Otherwise, how can we expect them not to return to a life of crime? How can we expect that person's primal survival instincts not to kick in, and that person to do whatever they feel they have to, to survive? As a society, I believe we all have an obligation to break the cycle of incarceration. It starts with the inmates now. Especially those that made a dumb mistake when young, and want to rectify it. We should allow them that opportunity, and a decent start upon release. To end recidivism, and the children coming up seeing their parents in prison, and emulating the same thing.

Thank you again for your time, and I hope these changes can be implemented for the sake of our community, and society.

Cordially,



Mrs. Carmen Gunn
Wife of Inmate