

To the Members of the Sentencing Commission,

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to share our experience, concerns and recommendations regarding the CT Department of Correction's visitation policies and practices.

My name is Joyce Betts and I am the acting Executive Director of Families in Crisis. We are a private nonprofit agency who for the last 30+ years has worked closely with the Department to provide supportive services to families of offenders. I am here today on behalf of the many families who can't or, for fear of stigmatization, hesitate to come before you with suggestions that would enhance positive social connections.

I would like to propose the following five recommendations:

1) ***Development of family friendly policies and practices that are standardized and implemented on a consistent basis.***

Although the Department has written statewide visitation policies - and every institution believes they follow them in a consistent manner - they do not. We hear over and over again that each correctional center interprets the policies differently.

If a visitor is denied they can appeal to the Warden. But, every Warden reviews cases based on their personal views and biases. It is not unusual for someone to be allowed to visit at one facility but not another. Sometimes it is the officer at the reception area that makes the decision based on his own understanding of the rules. If a visitor doesn't know about the appeal process, or is afraid to ask for a supervisor, they don't get to visit.

2) ***Inmates be allowed to develop a list that is inclusive of all their positive social connections.***

A visiting list that could include their pastor, grandparents, a supportive aunt but most importantly - all their children. Presently inmates can rotate names on their visitation list every 120 days. But it's not like they have up to date address books with the latest contact information. In addition, counselors who process the paperwork are very busy so alternating people is timely. The Department can still control the number of visitors allowed per inmate during each visit and for a period of time. This would ensure that visiting rooms are not crowded and their staff overwhelmed.

3) ***Free transportation services should be expanded.***

Not every loved one can travel to an institution to visit. If they do not have access to private transportation and/or the resources to get there visiting is impossible. We provide this service on a limited basis and our families tell us this is the most important service we provide.

4) ***Take advantage of every technological opportunity to connect inmates to their loved ones.***

The federal system has implemented Kiosk email systems and states such as New York, New Hampshire and New Mexico use video visitation. These are just a few examples of correctional systems that have successfully implemented these avenues.

5) ***Expand the halfway house model to incorporate family friendly visiting.***

Presently half way houses operate to provide men and women the opportunity to secure employment while still providing monitoring and support in the community. However, we miss a very critical opportunity to reconnect them with their children and families. Children believe that they will have more access to their parent while they are in the halfway house, however the invisible barriers (limited visiting times, limited space, and facility culture) prevent them from seeing their mom or dad.

Once a man or woman is in the system they are inmates. The only time they feel like a person (a father/mother or son/daughter, spouse, worker, etc.) is when they connect to the outside. We need to build on those opportunities that enhance personhood because that is who they will be when discharged. All the research shows how critical this is to release success.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our suggestions and I welcome any comments or questions.