STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
60B WESTON STREET, HARTFORD, CT 06120-1551

JAMES D. McGAUGHEY
Executive Director

Phone: 1/860-297-4307
Confidential Fax: 1/860-297-4305

Testimony of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities
Judiciary Committee
April 4, 2007

Submitted by: James D. McGaughey
Executive Director

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on **Raised Bill No. 7407, AN ACT CONCERNING CITIZEN OVERSIGHT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION.**

This bill would establish a prison oversight commission that would review matters related to the Department of Correction's programming, disciplinary processes, overall health and safety, reentry policies, telephone service contracts and practices related to diversity and cultural competence. The bill calls for the commission to prepare an annual report of findings and recommendations, and to conduct a public hearing. It would be comprised of the Chairs and Ranking Members of the Judiciary Committee, the Commissioner of the Department of Correction, fourteen public members appointed by the Governor and legislative leaders, and the Executive Directors of the African-American Affairs Commission and the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission.

If this legislation goes forward, I would urge inclusion of a designated representative from a disability rights organization. As the Committee is aware, increasing numbers of people with psychiatric disabilities have been incarcerated in recent years. Nationally, it is now estimated that over 20% of all prison inmates have a mental illness serious enough to require treatment. Estimates in Connecticut are slightly lower (a total of 12% - 16% based on surveys conducted some five years ago), but recent information indicates that as much as 10% of our inmate population is thought to have "serious" mental illness. Many factors contribute to this unfortunate trend, but whatever its origins, it has tremendous implications for prison management, mental health care requirements, educational and rehabilitation programming, disciplinary practices and overall human rights. Considering that the correctional system also houses people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities, communications and sensory disabilities, and physical disabilities, it would seem that any oversight commission established in law ought to have permanent representation from a designated disability rights advocacy organization.

Thank you for considering these comments. If there are any questions, please feel free to contact me and I will try to provide answers.