

**Testimony of Cary Brown, Executive Director of the Vermont Commission on Women
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
April 26, 2024**

RE: H876, an act relating to miscellaneous amendments to the corrections laws

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about issues concerning incarcerated women. The Vermont Commission on Women has long prioritized the goal of improving conditions for women involved in the criminal justice system, as evidenced by our long-standing policy statement:

The Vermont Commission on Women supports legislation, policies, programs, and initiatives that provide women equality with male prisoners in facilities, programs, services, and geographic placement, while also considering gender-specific needs and the needs of the children of imprisoned women, as well as community support systems upon release.

Our history in this area extends back many years. We have been part of the Incarcerated Women's Initiative, decades ago; we have collaborated with the Women's Caucus on public education and advocacy efforts; and some of you may be aware of a white paper¹ published in 2012 that we contributed to. This paper was written in response to the move of the women to the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility, and outlined numerous concerns that we and our partners had at the time. Many of these concerns remain today, twelve years later, including an ailing physical plant and limited opportunities to work and build marketable skills.

Over the years we have collaborated with many partners who work directly with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, including the Department of Corrections as well as the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Vermont Works for Women, Mercy Connections, Lund, the ACLU, Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform, the Women's Justice and Freedom Initiative, the United Way, and others.

We have held numerous listening forums in the facility and we have received many letters from women in the facility.

Through this work and these partnerships, we have heard consistent concerns about the future of incarceration for women in Vermont, and have recommendations based on these concerns.

CONCERNS

With the frequent shuffling of women from one facility to another, some valuable programs and opportunities have been lost. In Swanton and Windsor, Vermont Works for Women ran a modular home building program, which not only taught marketable skills to the women, but also helped address the housing shortage, which has only worsened. The Girls Scouts ran a program called Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, which brought girls into the facility to spend time with their mothers and other relatives. Vermont

¹ [Incarcerated Women White Paper 2 24 12 0.pdf \(vermont.gov\)](#)

Works for Women was able to bring a version of their Rosie's Girls trades program for girls into the facility, again providing valuable time for women to spend with their daughters and relatives. In previous facilities, outdoor space was much more prominent in the women's day-to-day life. The physical limitations of CRCF clearly demand a change, but any new facility must consider these kinds of opportunities in the most expansive way possible.

The culture at CRCF which has contributed to rampant incidents of sexual misconduct, affecting both inmates and staff, has not significantly changed, and will not change with simply a new building. We recognize that efforts are being made to improve the reporting and investigation process, and that the contract for the corrections staff includes good pay increases, which helps convey a sense of dignity in the work. But changes need to continue, and any new facility will not address the problems by itself.

A disturbingly large number of the women at CRCF are either detainees or are being held simply on technical violations and lack of suitable housing. DOC has made progress in recent years to reduce the housing-related barriers to release, and is continuing to work to reduce the number of people held on technical violations. Any new facility will need to take the needs of all of the populations in it into consideration, including those who do not qualify for housing in the re-entry facility.

The dramatically increased bed count in the proposed plans does not reflect the stated goal in Justice Reinvestment II of, "Improve public safety in Vermont, while creating immediate opportunities to reduce recidivism and achieve long-term savings by reducing contract bed needs significantly."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require a planning process that prioritizes those most affected by incarceration: those incarcerated and their families, facility staff, and providers
- Direct the planning process to include research and recommendations into meeting the programming, health, and transitional needs of residents and designing facilities around those needs
 - Programming and services tailored to specific populations including those who qualify for re-entry services and those who don't qualify because of behavioral or other conditions, detainees, very long-term, and those with life sentences
 - At the same time, we caution against creating a situation in which the best services and programs are available inside the facility, and instead invest much more significantly in building community supports that reach people both when they are released but also before they are ever sentenced or even engaged with the criminal justice system
- Create a formal study committee to research alternatives to incarceration
- Ask the Family Friendly Visitation Study Committee created in this bill to make recommendations concerning the location of any new correctional facility for women with an eye to making it as accessible as possible to the families of those inmates
- Direct the planning process to align its goals with those of the Justice Reinvestment II work