



Replacement of the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility – Capital Bill

Senate Judiciary Committee

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Thank you for your ongoing work on improving our justice responses in Vermont including the replacement of the Women’s Correctional Facility. Justice-involved women in Vermont deserve a robust system of support, rehabilitation and healing. The wellbeing of justice-involved women in Vermont is reflective and indicative of the wellbeing of our communities.

The Vermont Network has been deeply involved in conversations regarding incarcerated women in Vermont for decades. For over 20 years, the Vermont Network has operated a statewide direct services program (DIVAS) for incarcerated survivors of domestic and sexual violence out of the women’s correctional facility. Through a small contract with the Department of Corrections, DIVAS provides in-person, trauma informed advocacy and support to incarcerated women who are victims of domestic violence, sexual violence and trafficking. Our staff work directly in the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility (CRCF) every day. **National data, as well as our in-facility assessments, indicate that over 90% of all women incarcerated in Vermont have experienced domestic or sexual violence or abuse in their lifetime.**

We appreciate the Department of Corrections’ efforts to engage stakeholders in their planning process. Since May of 2023, the Department of Corrections has convened community stakeholders multiple times to discuss the planning process and to elicit feedback. These sessions have included providers that offer services directly in the facility as well as advocacy organizations such as the ACLU-VT and Free Her and the Defender General’s Prisoners’ Rights program. These sessions have provided excellent opportunities to engage in dialogue regarding the replacement of CRCF and the Department of Corrections has been willing to both seek feedback and integrate this feedback into their projections and plans. This stakeholder engagement must continue throughout the next several years.

We believe that CRCF needs to be replaced. The facility itself is not conducive to healing, rehabilitation or the provision of programming. It is an unhealthy place for people to live and work in Vermont. However, there are important policy considerations that must be addressed in the planning for a replacement facility:

Size and Scale

We believe that Vermont should utilize an evidence and data driven approach to determining the size and scale of a replacement facility. Since the start of the pandemic, the number of people held at CRCF has never risen above 130. The American Corrections Association recommends that facilities operate at no more than 85% capacity. We understand that specialized beds are required in the proposed design, however we are concerned that potential redundancies continue to exist in the current design proposals, increasing the **total** number of permanent and specialized planned beds. The state is also



detaining more individuals pretrial than prior to the pandemic. The high number of detainees in the system indicates that the proposed bed count could be lowered further as the court system addresses the record number of cases impacted by court backlogs.

Balance of Re-Entry Beds

The Department of Corrections is proposing to model a replacement facility on a model imported from Maine, which includes an incarcerative facility and a re-entry facility. We believe that this model holds promise. However, we do not support the currently proposed balance of incarcerative and re-entry beds. The proposed criteria is a stark contrast to criteria for the women's re-entry facility in Maine which has been touted as the model for the current planning proposal. In Maine, women are eligible for admittance to the Southern Maine Women's Reentry Center when they have five years remaining on their sentence. We have provided feedback to the Department of Corrections on their proposed eligibility criteria for the re-entry facility and look forward to additional conversations about this planning.

Community Supports

Vermont must ensure that justice-involved women are provided adequate resources and continuity in their services from the facility to the community. Currently, re-entry services are fragmented and underfunded. Improving community reentry support and vocational training must be resourced in order for the policy goals of the proposed new facility to be met. Currently most service providers who are contracted by the Department of Corrections to provide services to incarcerated women are not funded to provide re-entry services. This leads to significant gaps between service providers offering services within the facility and those providing resources in the community. Funding providers to offer services both inside and outside the facility would provide a re-entry bridge and contribute to the continuity of services and supports that women need as they re-enter.

Finally, as Vermont contemplates the replacement of CRCF, the State's approach to incarceration must be integrated with broader justice reform efforts to improve outcomes and interrupt pathways to incarceration. The policy decisions made by the General Assembly will influence trends related to incarcerated women in Vermont. We encourage the committee to continue to pursue justice policy which aims to both prevent criminal and promote greater consistency in practices related to pre-trial detention.