



Senate Institutions Committee: Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility

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Thank you for the invitation to testify today regarding H. 543. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is Vermont's leading voice on domestic and sexual violence in our state. We represent 15 independent non-profit Member Organizations throughout the state which provide advocacy and direct support to victims of domestic and sexual violence. Together, these organizations served 8,550 individuals last year in Vermont and reached 14,000 youth through prevention programming in schools and other settings throughout our state.

I am here to speak with you today about the Capital Bill, and the \$250,000 appropriation therein to Buildings and General Services to conduct a feasibility study to "evaluate options for the site location of a new correctional facility to replace Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility". While we appreciate the shared concern regarding the current facility and its significant limitations, we disagree with the scope and focus of the proposed study. The focus of any evaluation of the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility must be broader than the building and facilities and must include stakeholder input beyond the Department of Corrections.

The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence has worked with the Department of Corrections to run and operate a program called Discussing Intimate Violence and Accessing Support (DIVAS) in the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility since 2004.

In collaboration with the Department of Corrections, DIVAS provides confidential, survivor-centered, and trauma-informed advocacy, education, and support for criminal justice-involved survivors of domestic and sexual violence housed at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility. DIVAS programming is designed to help interrupt the cycle of trauma-based criminogenic behavior which is the typical pathway into incarceration for women. In 2018, the DIVAS Program served 436 women through individual and group programming options.

Over the years of operating DIVAS, we have learned much about the need for gender-responsive environments for incarcerated women. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as many as 80% of women in prison in the United States are survivors of domestic violence and/or sexual assault. Most incarcerated women have histories of severe abuse across their lifespans. These histories are directly linked to the criminal behaviors which bring them into



the criminal justice system. Women with trauma histories are at greater risk for substance abuse disorder, mental health disorders, homelessness, serious injury and death by homicide.¹

In Vermont, women are convicted of non-violent crimes, drug offenses, passing bad checks, prostitution and other criminal acts associated with survival. The Vermont Department of Corrections has estimated that only 35% of incarcerated women have committed a crime falling within the spectrum of violence (from simple assault to homicide). The staff of the DIVAS program report that the state houses between 12 and 15 very violent women.

There has been much reported about the deleterious impact of incarceration on families and communities. According to the “Report on the Rights of Children of Arrested and Incarcerated Parents” which was submitted to this committee on January 15, 2015, “Parental incarceration is a strong risk factor and indicator for a range of adverse outcomes for children and caregivers.”² According to the report, as many as 6,000 Vermont children belong to parents who are incarcerated and nearly all the women held at CRCF are mothers.

Across the country, jurisdictions are looking at innovative alternatives to incarceration and ways to create rehabilitative environments for incarcerated women. From implementing alternatives to incarceration to creating incarcerative settings focused on using trauma-informed rehabilitation, treatment, and reparation practices as a means of accountability, there are communities and groups doing the kind of work with incarcerated women that is possible here in Vermont. We know that offering these kinds of supports to incarcerated women can and does make a difference in their lives based on what we see through our DIVAS program. Training on and implementing a trauma-informed approach has helped incarcerated women as well as the Corrections Officers working at CRCF, officers who bring their own experiences of trauma into the work setting. At this moment, there is a cross-discipline realization that we can create an incarcerative setting in Vermont that can result in positive and lasting change in the lives of incarcerated women and their families and their communities. At this moment there are at least two national-scale grant proposals that include an investment in bringing innovated programming to the women’s prison in Vermont, and a critical mass of Vermont female leaders who want collaborate to make these kinds of changes in the lives of incarcerated women. We believe that our scale and unique assets here in Vermont could allow us to chart a different path.

We respectfully request that the Committee broaden the scope of the study to ***evaluate alternatives to incarceration and the services required to meet the needs of Vermont’s female prison population and to include stakeholder input***. I am also submitting for the record a letter co-signed by the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Vermont Works for Women, Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform and ACLU-VT requesting this change.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/consequences.html>

² <http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Legislative-Reports/Final-Act-168-Report-1-14-15.pdf>