

Dear Committee members,

I am writing to express my strong support of H.445, “An act relating to education and corrections infrastructure in the State” and H.438, “An act relating to a working group to develop a plan to eliminate incarceration.”

My name is Jayna Ahsaf and I am the FreeHer campaign organizer for The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. I work with formerly incarcerated women and have seen first hand that prison does not rehabilitate but exacerbates many of the social issues that lead to incarceration. Many people in our prison system are struggling with poverty, substance use disorder, mental health struggles and unhealed trauma. As a born and raised Vermonter, I have personally seen the effect of decreased investment in our communities result in my neighbors and loved ones increasingly becoming entangled in the criminal legal system. Vermont has the second highest rate of homelessness in the country per capita yet we are contemplating new prison construction when Vermonters desperately need increased support and services. We also treat 684 people specifically for opioid use disorder in our State prison system — further suggesting a need for accessible and expanded treatment options. In addition, Burlington High School is still in a Macys and South Burlington classrooms are out of compliance with the American Disabilities Act. Vermonters have many needs that require an urgent response and choosing prison construction at this moment could result in disastrous consequences that impact the well-being of our communities for decades to come.

There is discussion that a “reentry facility” modeled after the Maine facility is an appropriate solution to address some of the issues raised above. Our concern is that because this facility is proposed to be 45 minutes from the Canadian border, many Vermonters will be far removed from the communities they reside in. This will result in minimal contact with family and friends, an inability to meet with service providers directly in their neighborhoods, and missed opportunities to build connections in their towns that will sustain them after their release. Please consider broadening your site selection study to include housing, transitional housing, in-patient treatment centers, and other supported living models and care facilities. Please allow communities the opportunity to develop solutions that address the root causes of incarceration as proposed in H.438.

I urge you to report H.445 and H.438 out of committee with a favorable vote.

Sincerely,
Jayna Ahsaf