



Testimony on CRCF Stakeholder Group FreeHer Vermont, April 30, 2025

Background

FreeHer VT is a campaign of the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. We are a people-powered movement run mostly by volunteer organizers, and our work includes advocacy, direct support, education, and more. Our goal is to end the incarceration of women, girls, trans, and nonbinary individuals by creating community-based and preventative solutions that prioritize recovery, accountability, and support. FreeHer representatives have been attending the CRCF stakeholder meetings since 2023, and while we appreciate the creation of the space and the opportunity to connect, we are concerned that tangible progress has been limited in certain key areas:

Areas of Concern

- **Policy discussions around design and detainees:** There has been minimal opportunity to explore specific design elements of the replacement facility due to not knowing where it will be physically located. However, there are still conversations that can be spearheaded around certain aspects of design and operations. Namely, stakeholders broadly agree on the need to address policies that expand the services available to detainees, yet actionable improvements remain elusive. Referencing the stakeholder group's meeting minutes, we first broached this topic in June 2024, it has been almost a year later with no actionable next steps or formalized plans to address this. Now, more than ever, given the detention of Rümeyşa Öztürk and other political prisoners, Vermont needs to address detainees.
- **Reducing recidivism and decreasing the rate of incarceration through funding community-based services:** There has been little recognition of community-based initiatives that can be pursued to decrease incarceration rates. Vermont lacks a needs assessment of those incarcerated that can identify what service or setting is required to address the root causes leading them to incarceration. As we know, there are hundreds of Vermonters remaining in prison due to lack of approved housing, rehab beds, and other treatment options. More than 880 (or more than 60%) of the roughly 1,450 incarcerated Vermonters are on DOC's mental health caseload. Around 1,000 individuals—an overwhelming 88% of the population—are living with chronic illness. The lack of services in the community leaves prisons as the default "solution" to systemic gaps in care, which is simply immoral and should be against Vermont's values. Further, at a time when housing is devastatingly underfunded and Vermont residents are being displaced from their homes, shelters, and hotels, this prioritization of prisons is alarming.



- **Reentry facility operations:** FreeHer VT has raised the question to explore the possibility of contracted service providers fully managing the reentry facility, yet we have not had the opportunity in the stakeholder working group meetings or otherwise to discuss contractor interest, resources they would need to do this, or operational feasibility. This also includes discussions around allocating significant funding to service providers to work with currently and formerly incarcerated people in the community, and not just within the prison walls—which has been an expressed interest. Contracted service providers supply the most consistent and comprehensive support for incarcerated people and that should be valued and rewarded.
- **Bed Totals:** There is strong support for adjusting the bed totals to prioritize a robust reentry facility, reserving only a small number of secure beds. As with the reentry operations, substantial conversations on this topic have yet to take place. Although FreeHer believes it is economically and socially irresponsible to spend millions to incarcerate so few women and people, it is important to highlight that there is a growing consensus for resources to be expended to address reentry rather than incarceration. Let's remember the vast majority of the sentenced people in CRCF are serving sentences that are short in years but devastating in impact. Only about 13 people at CRCF have minimum release dates that extend past five years. Only around a dozen people currently incarcerated at CRCF will even experience the new prison that is projected to take at least a decade to construct.
- **Lack of representation from directly impacted people:** Currently and formerly incarcerated voices remain absent from meetings, greatly reducing our ability to hear perspectives from the people who will be most impacted by the decisions made around a replacement facility. There is precedent for the presence of directly impacted people at these meetings. Two women incarcerated at CRCF were at a stakeholder meeting held at the Burlington Probation and Parole. We had illuminating conversations about the supports that would be more appropriate to them other than prisons and if further integration of directly impacted voices was prioritized, we could learn substantially more about the unique needs of some of the most vulnerable Vermonters among us. To uplift the voices on the inside, I would like to share a few responses to our survey where we asked women and people, "What do you think would have helped you more instead of prison?"

"Long term residential places that have routine and discipline but not demands and bars. To have mentors, not correctional officers. Jail is jail. Most of us are addicts who need different type of supports rather than prison. Even other heinous crime can use supports that fit those needs rather than bars." -Respondent 12

"Group home for mental health." -Respondent 2

"I wonder if 90 million can buy housing for offenders? ... Supportive housing - rehab." -Respondent



Recommendations

Moving forward, FreeHer suggests the prioritization of a few pressing issues to ensure more effective outcomes:

- **Design and Policy Alignment:** Establish policies in the legislature and Department of Corrections to ensure detainees have access to services and the reentry facility while in custody and also expand funding for contracted providers to provide care outside the prison walls. In addition, creating continued channels for communication with the legislature about the stakeholder progress, formalizing this group through the legislature or establishing formal commitments to incorporate stakeholders perspectives, and implementation of deliverables if necessary to help us move the stakeholder group into an action-oriented space versus an informational sharing space.
- **Alternative Models:** Create a separate container mandated by the legislature to address the significant gaps in community services and implement processes to decrease incarceration rates if the CRCF stakeholder space cannot hold these conversations. It feels important to clarify whether the stakeholders group current purpose aligns with the original intent of House Corrections and Institutions members, and it would be helpful to review the memo sent from the committee in 2023 to ensure we are aligned about the goals of the group and whether the creation of another space is warranted to discuss broader systemic issues that impact incarceration rates. Including additional unique stakeholders like Pathways Vermont and Jenna's Promise could also help generate conversations about what is truly needed to address the public safety needs of Vermont in a way that is effective and maintains human dignity.
- **Exploration of Contracted Providers Operating the Reentry Facility:** Facilitate space for dialogue with contracted service providers to assess feasibility, interest, and resource allocation for reentry facility operations. With the continual staffing crisis at DOC, we must acknowledge that Vermonters do not have a strong desire to be correctional officers—they want life affirming jobs in social work, advocacy, and nonprofit spaces. Each year the prison system requires millions more from us to function. The DOC budget has increased by \$40 million in just three fiscal years—from \$189 million to an eye-popping \$230 million. How much longer will we continue to pour money into this system, where will we draw the line? It is fiscally irresponsible to keep hemorrhaging money on a system that is breaking down. It would be more productive for our limited tax dollars to be spent conducting an assessment of the resources needed for community providers to run a reentry program if they are interested.

In closing, FreeHer VT urges three timely steps: that the Committee clarify the stakeholder group's mandate, ensure timely updates on progress, and support the creation of spaces for meaningful, solution-focused dialogue.