

July 16, 2020

VIA E-MAIL

Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins  
New York State Senate  
Room 907, Legislative Office Building  
Albany, New York 12247

Re: Prison Oversight Bill Support

Dear Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins:

This letter is to request your support for [S8046/A10194](#), a bill that would enhance the prison oversight responsibilities of the Correctional Association of New York (CANY), the only non-profit organization with legislative authority to monitor the prisons in New York State.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent protests resulting from the death of George Floyd have highlighted the importance of law enforcement oversight and accountability. While cell phone video can capture police abuses of power, there is no equivalent mechanism to uncover the conditions of confinement and abuses committed by corrections officers, which remain hidden from public view inside of state correctional facilities.

The New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) is arguably the most opaque system in New York State. The Correctional Association of New York provides the only outside accountability in that system, but its current authority is insufficient. Besides increasing transparency in DOCCS, CANY's access to facilities can also serve as the canary in the coal mine—an early warning system that identifies adverse practices and trends long before they can blossom into serious problems and potential liability for the state.

S8046/A10194 would clarify, increase, and facilitate CANY's prison oversight responsibility without cost to New York State. Specifically, it would increase CANY's access to the type and amount of information that the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) maintains on its facilities and the people incarcerated therein. It would also reduce the ways that DOCCS can impede the oversight process.

Further, it would move CANY's existing legislation into the Correction Law. This bill would reinforce CANY's status as an independent oversight entity that reports directly to the legislature and the public with the goal of providing transparency to the agency that needs it most.

The medical exigencies of COVID-19 in prisons have underlined and magnified the issues that incarcerated people confront daily, such as inadequate access to medical or mental health care, physical abuse by staff, the need for more rehabilitative and meaningful educational and vocational programs, and other things. The conditions experienced during incarceration can have a tremendous impact on the likelihood of successful reentry after release and increasing transparency in DOCCS via S8046/A10194 would help to ensure that incarcerated people are treated humanely and with dignity as they prepare to rejoin their communities.

For the foregoing reasons, we respectfully request that you support and pass S8046/A10194.

Sincerely,

/s/

Alison Wilkey, Esq.

Director of Public Policy

John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity