

February 1, 2021

Rep. Walt Blackman
Arizona House of Representatives
1700 W. Washington St.
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Rep. Diego Rodriguez
Arizona House of Representatives
1700 W. Washington St.
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Via email

RE: Support for HB 2167

Dear Chair Blackman and Ranking Member Rodriguez:

We write today to express our support for and urge you to pass HB 2167, a bill that would create an Office of the Corrections Ombudsman to provide independent oversight of the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR). The ADCRR costs taxpayers \$1.3 billion annually and is responsible for the safety of the general public, thousands of corrections staff, and 38,000 incarcerated people. Yet this agency does not have any independent oversight and has become notorious for its lack of transparency, responsiveness, and accountability.

Independent oversight of the ADCRR is necessary and long overdue. ADCRR has been embroiled in a string of escalating crises for years. These crises include riots and escapes; dangerous understaffing; broken locks at the Lewis facility that have cost millions upon millions to repair; a years-long lawsuit that slams the state with millions in fines for failing to provide constitutionally adequate health care; and facilities with contaminated water, inedible food, non-existent rehabilitative programming, and sub-par mental health treatment. COVID-19 has made bad conditions worse, infecting thousands of incarcerated people and staff and taking the life of a warden. These conditions are harmful to both staff and incarcerated people and create inhumane, unsafe prisons that lead to recidivism, not rehabilitation.

In the face of deteriorating conditions and an ever-increasing budget, ADCRR lacks transparency and responsiveness to the public, lawmakers, and the 38,000 Arizona families with incarcerated loved ones. Last year, ADCRR passed rules to make it harder for media to contact incarcerated people, discouraged staff from speaking publicly about problems, and fired several whistleblowers. ADCRR officials virtually never hold press conferences – press conferences in the last week were a notable exception and occurred only after two people escaped from the Florence prison facility. Families who attempt to help loved ones resolve sometimes life-or-death issues with the ADCRR are ignored, threatened with retaliation, or get the run-around. HB 2167 would create secure, confidential ways for staff, incarcerated people, and families to report problems. The bill would also give the ombudsman power to help resolve persistent complaints and review the efficacy and accessibility of the grievance process for incarcerated people.

The ombudsman created in HB 2167 would have powers similar to established independent prison and jail oversight bodies in [Texas](#), [Washington State](#), [Ohio](#), [New York](#), and [New Jersey](#). The ombudsman would have power to enter, inspect, and monitor prisons unannounced and on demand and publicly report its findings and recommend improvements. The ADCRR would be

required to respond with a corrective action plan, and the ombudsman could do further investigations and inspections to determine whether changes are actually made. The ombudsman cannot force the ADCRR to fix problems, but it can ensure that the public, the governor, and the legislature are aware of these problems before they become costly and life-threatening catastrophes.

Good government requires transparency and accountability, and HB 2167 would create it for Arizona's prison system. HB 2167 includes a reasonable budget for the ombudsman to do its work. That work, in turn, would help inform lawmakers when reviewing budgets and proposing reforms. Independent oversight requires some costs to operate well, but an ounce of prevention is worth a pound – and millions of dollars – of cure. As each new crisis and budget cycle at the ADCRR shows, oversight can't wait.

We urge you to pass HB 2167 this session. Thank you for considering our views, and if you have further questions, please contact Molly Gill at mgill@famm.org.

Sincerely,

Organizations

4Tucson

African American Christian Clergy Coalition

American Friends Service Committee – Arizona

Arizona Attorneys for Criminal Justice

Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence

Arizonans for Transparency and Accountability in Corrections

FAMM

FWD.us

John Howard Association of Illinois

Sonoran Prevention Works

Impacted Individuals and Other Advocates

Lillian Coppess, Tucson

Claire Tate, Tucson

John Fabricius, Phoenix

Deborah North, Tucson

Charlene Schwickrath, Tucson

Sue Braga, Phoenix

Nate Wade, Assistant Public Defender, Pima County

Paul Parisi, 4Tucson Director – Government Domain

Laetitia Hua, Scottsdale

cc: Members of the House Committees on Criminal Justice Reform, Rules, and Appropriations