January 27, 2021

Anthony Annucci, Acting Commissioner
Jeff McKoy, Deputy Commissioner for Programs
Department of Corrections and Community Supervision
1220 Washington Avenue, Building 2
Albany, NY 12226-2050

Dear Commissioner Annucci and Deputy Commissioner McKoy:

We write to express grave concern over the decision by the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (“DOCCS”) to contract Ashland University to provide distance learning at correctional facilities in New York State.

New York State is home to some of the finest educational institutions in the world such as Columbia University, New York University, Cornell University, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Vassar College, and the University of Rochester. Many of these institutions provide educational opportunities at correctional institutions at their own expense. Educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals help reduce rates of recidivism, allow them to forge lasting alumni relationships with their educational institutions that teach at correctional facilities, and afford them local re-entry support to match their needs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York, it was understandable to limit in-person education opportunities to prevent the spread of the virus. However, we are distressed to learn that DOCCS did not contract with New York educational institutions to provide distance learning. Rather, DOCCS contracted with Ashland University, an Ohio-based institution, to provide distance learning at correctional institutions. Ashland University has partnered with JPay to provide distance learning through tablets. JPay is a subsidiary of Securus Technologies that operates pay phones and tablets in correctional facilities, which has been involved in numerous scandals charging incarcerated individuals exorbitant fees for their usage.

Even more concerning is Ashland’s inability to provide quality educational services. Ashland was $70 million in debt, given a junk credit rating by Moody’s, and cited by the Higher Learning Commission, the regional accreditor, for transcript manipulation. Ashland’s prospects only turned around when the federal Department of Education contracted with Ashland to provide distance
learning at correctional facilities. Ashland now enrolls as many students on its campus as it does in correctional facilities. Additionally, unlike other educational institutions that offered in-person education prior to the pandemic, Ashland only offers distance learning opportunities. The only opportunity for interaction between incarcerated students and their professors is through a messaging platform that the tablet must be plugged into and the tablet often breaks down. Moreover, Ashland only has one digital librarian for these students across the country and only has one staffer that manages these students’ career prospects and re-entry into society.

We implore DOCCS to contract with New York educational institutions to provide distance learning opportunities at correctional facilities. The New York Consortium for Higher Education in Prison (“NYCHEP”) is a collection of outstanding higher educational institutions in New York. The members of NYCHEP are rooted in New York communities and have greater incentives to see their incarcerated students succeed. To those institutions, their students are not just some persons at the end of a tablet, they are future returning community members.

In Unity,

Robert Jackson
Senator, 31st District

Liz Krueger
Senator, 28th District

Brad Hoylman
Senator, 27th District

Jamaal T. Bailey
Senator, 36th District

Leroy Comrie
Senator, 14th District

John W. Mannion
Senator, 50th District

Andrew Gounardes
Senator, 22nd District

Jessica Ramos
Senator, 13th District
George M. Borrello
Senator, 57th District

Samra Brouk
Senator, 55th District

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Senator, 33rd District

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Senator, 25th District

Shelley B. Mayer
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Alessandra Biaggi
Senator, 34th District

Luis Sepúlveda
Senator, 32nd District