



**TESTIMONY BY KENNETH EDWARDS,
ON BEHALF OF THE CENTER FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES (CEO)
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE COMMITTEE ON CRIME VICTIMS, CRIME &
CORRECTION HEARING ON HOW THE ELDER PAROLE AND FAIR & TIMELY PAROLE BILLS
WILL IMPROVE PAROLE RELEASE LAWS AND PUBLIC SAFETY IN NEW YORK STATE**

Thank you to the New York State Senate Committee on Crime Victims, Crime, and Correction, and in particular Chair Julia Salazar, for the opportunity to present testimony today on the Elder Parole (S.15A-Hoylman) and Fair & Timely Parole (S.7514-Salazar) bills.

As a directly impacted individual/former CEO participant and now Leadership & Organizing Manager with the Center for Employment Opportunities, I submit this testimony in support of both bills and respectfully urge the Legislature to finally call a vote on them.

CEO serves over 8,000 formerly incarcerated individuals every year. Our mission is to provide immediate, effective, and comprehensive employment services to individuals who have recently returned home from incarceration, no matter their conviction history or length of incarceration. Many New Yorkers leaving prison have been out of the labor force for an extended period. Providing immediate access to transitional employment along with job training, placement and retention services has been shown to reduce recidivism and assist in social reintegration, and is a sustainable, long-term solution to improving public safety and reducing the size of the prison population.

In fact, we serve many individuals who historically have shown the highest likelihood of recidivating, yet harness their full potential and make meaningful contributions to our communities, our state economy, and society, through our participant-centered program model. In FY 2019, CEO's New York offices enrolled more than 2,700 people, hired more than 2,000 as CEO employees in transitional jobs, and made more than 1,500 permanent job placements with more than 200 businesses. CEO's approach has been rigorously evaluated and shown to reduce recidivism while also returning more than \$3 for every \$1 of public dollar.

BACKGROUND

Because of decades of harsh sentencing and a racially-biased carceral system, New York State has a multi-layered crisis of aging and ill persons confined in its state's prisons. Even as the state's overall prison population has declined, the percentage of incarcerated people who are older adults has dramatically increased. At the same time, we know that countless formerly incarcerated people, like our program participants, have returned home and made tremendous



contributions to their communities as mentors, community leaders, entrepreneurs, policy advocates and more.

The Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills will help to improve community safety by (1) reorienting parole release policies to value personal transformation and safety, rather than vengeance, (2) returning mentors and violence interrupters to struggling communities, and (3) saving the state an estimated \$522 million per year that could be better spent on housing, healthcare (including drug treatment and mental healthcare), material support for crime victims and survivors, and more.

THE PROBLEM

Under current law, thousands of people in prison have no viable pathway to be considered for release. These include people who are serving life without parole sentences or sentences that exceed their natural lifetimes. The impacts of incarceration extend beyond the individual people in prison. Tens of thousands of families across our state are missing one or more loved ones: children, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Furthermore, New York spends an average of \$60,000 annually to incarcerate just one person, and between \$100,000 and \$240,000 annually per older adult in prison. This is money that should instead be invested in resources that deliver real community health and safety.

THE FAIR & TIMELY PAROLE ACT

New York must reform its parole system by passing the Fair & Timely Parole Act (S.7514-Salazar/A.4231A-Weprin) to ensure that people have a meaningful opportunity to demonstrate their rehabilitation and be released. Passage of this bill **will** be a meaningful step towards ensuring fair parole hearings, increasing New York's dismally low parole release rate, and reducing the number of New Yorkers languishing behind bars. This bill **will not** take away parole commissioners' discretion and it still requires that the Board consider the nature of someone's crime and any victim impact statements in their release decisions.

ELDER PAROLE

New York must reform its parole system to provide hope for families across this state by passing Elder Parole (S.15A-Hoylman/A.8855-Davila). If enacted, this bill would allow older adults in prison who have served at least 15 consecutive years of their current sentence eligible for individualized parole consideration. It is not a "blanket release" policy, nor does it guarantee release for anyone based on their age. Rather, it would give people who have transformed themselves an opportunity to be heard by the Board of Parole and, subject to the Board's discretion, to be released to their families and communities to live out their final years with dignity. Importantly, reincarceration rates for older adults are vanishingly small.



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CONCLUSION

As the the nation's largest reentry provider, CEO enthusiastically supports legislation that promotes decarceration, justice reinvestment and economic mobility for formerly incarcerated individuals. We are pleased to write in support, and on behalf of the many individuals over the age of 55 who are currently achieving their goals and positively impacting their local communities, in our programs.

Again, we respectfully ask that you pass the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills this session.

Thank you for considering our comments.

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