



TESTIMONY BY THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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 submit testimony today on the Elder Parole (S.15A-Hoylman) and Fair & Timely Parole (S.7514-Salazar) bills. Together, these two parole justice measures will reunite families, improve community safety, and save the state massive sums of money that could be reallocated toward urgent community needs.

The Center for Justice was founded by two formerly incarcerated women who upon coming home from prison continued their advocacy and support for the women they left behind in prison. The Center seeks to end mass incarceration and promote alternatives to safety and justice and support movements to end incarceration and criminalization through research, policy advocacy, education, and public programming.

Last year, the Center [wrote a report](#) to highlight initial findings of the demographics of people who are dying behind bars in New York State prisons. While every other age group has experienced a decline in deaths as the number of overall incarcerated population in New York State has gone down, people 55 and older are dying at a higher rate than ever before. While it may seem obvious that the large majority of people dying behind bars are older, the stark upward trend is what is troubling. Older people have not always made up the majority of deaths or the majority of people incarcerated.

Even in the 80s and 90s when the total number of incarcerated people was more than double it is today, people 55 and older were not dying at this high of a rate. In fact, in the 1980s, people 55 and older made up 9% of all deaths. In the most recent decade, they

made up 56% of all deaths. A similar upward trend was found in people serving 15 or more years.

We are working on updating this report with the data from the last two years of the pandemic and sadly, anticipate similar devastating findings if not worse.

Increasingly excessive sentences, repeated parole denials, and minimal clemency releases from our last two governors are lending to people staying behind bars for longer thus increasing their chances of dying in prison without a meaningful opportunity for release.

In our recommendations we outline how the Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole bills will help to slow the number of deaths behind bars and interrupt the upward trend of older adults serving long sentences dying behind bars.

BACKGROUND

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 pathway whatsoever to even be considered for release, regardless of their transformation behind bars and whether they present any public safety risk. These include people who are serving life without parole sentences or sentences that exceed their natural lifetimes. Thousands more are, or will become, eligible for parole release consideration, yet current Board of Parole practices leave them little to no hope of getting approved. Specifically, the Board routinely denies release to people based on the one thing they can never change, namely the nature of the offense for which they were convicted however many years and decades ago. People in prison often completely transform themselves, accepting responsibility for their past actions, taking advantage of every opportunity for growth provided to them within the prison setting and even creating new ones, all *before* being repeatedly rejected by the Board. In effect, the Board is acting outside its original purpose of evaluating people's rehabilitation and readiness for release, ignoring

people's minimum sentences and re-sentencing them two years at a time with each denial.

Let us be clear: This is a racial justice issue. The vast majority of people in prison are Black and Latinx people as a result of systemic racism in our country. Furthermore, a comprehensive 2020 *Albany Times Union* investigation of parole hearing data found the Board of Parole was significantly less likely to release Black and Latinx people relative to their white counterparts. This is one part of a long line of racially disparate treatment in the criminal legal system, from school discipline and policing to parole supervision, yet it is an important one. The Times Union's investigation found that the Board released white people eight percentage points more than Black people and seven percentage points higher than Latinx people. According to their analysis, at the time of their reporting, 675 incarcerated Black and Latinx people would be home, reunited with their families and communities, if release rates were equalized. Over time, that amounts to thousands of families separated by racially biased parole denials.

The grave injustice of mass incarceration extends beyond the harm inflicted on 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. This bill would restore the Parole Board to its original purpose of evaluating people's readiness for release, changing the standard of parole release to primarily consider the person's rehabilitation while incarcerated and their current risk of violating the law. In other words, parole commissioners would no longer be able to perpetually deny people release based solely on the one fact that they can never change.

Passage of this bill **will** be a meaningful step towards ensuring fair parole hearings, increasing New York's dimly 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. The age of eligibility in the bill is 55 for two critical reasons: (1) That is the age at which the state’s prison agency, the Department of Correction and Community Supervision, like many other prison authors, classifies people as older adults, in line with the reality of accelerated aging behind bars. (2) The average age of death by so-called natural causes in New York State prisons is only 58. Sadly, the constant stress of the prison environment and separation from one’s family, compounded by the systemic malnourishment, unclean water, and other harms endemic to incarceration, causes, on average, what can only be called premature deaths.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we support these bills because we value the worth and dignity of all people. We believe no one is disposable, nor should anyone be defined by the worst thing they have ever done. Further, no one should die in prison. We believe in redemption and transformation. We believe in families, communities, and collective care.

We are pleased to be joined in our support for the bills by Gov. Hochul’s key advisor Dr. Hazel Dukes (President, NYS NAACP), the Rev. Al Sharpton (President, National Action Network), Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes and Deputy Senate Leader Michael Gianaris, Brooklyn DA Eric Gonzalez and Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg, many of the state’s largest crime victim & survivor advocacy groups, the Working Families Party, SEIU 1199, CWA District 1, Citizen Action of New York, and over 350 other organizations from Long Island to Buffalo.

2023 must be the year for parole justice. Again, we respectfully ask that you pass the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills this session.