

About RAPP: Mission and Strategies

Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP is a grassroots organizing and advocacy project that works to end mass incarceration by getting older people out of prison. RAPP was established in 2013 in New York City, supported by an Open Society Soros Fellowship award to Mujahid Farid. Farid had been released from prison in 2011 after serving 33 years; he had entered the system in 1978 with a sentence of 15 years to life and applied for parole 10 times before winning his release. He launched RAPP with a small group of people, most of whom had also served long prison terms.

Farid continues to lead RAPP with the support of two other full-time staff; a Central Organizing Committee of nine members; campaign volunteers; and coalition partners. While RAPP was founded in New York State and has programs specific to New York, its timely and resonant platform has been adopted by people across the country. (To start a RAPP chapter, please email NYRAPPCampaign@gmail.com.) RAPP has been based at The Correctional Association of New York, and is fiscally sponsored by Good Shepard Home, Inc., an I.R.S.-approved non-profit with 501(c)(3) status.

Mission

RAPP's goal is to reduce the elderly prison population in the U.S. by 30% by 2022, from the time of the campaign's launching in 2013.

The Context

RAPP's organizing platform directly tackles several mutually reinforcing pillars of mass incarceration, rooted in historical and structural racism:

- The prevailing punishment paradigm, which scapegoats those convicted of violence as “the worst of the worst”—non-rehabilitative and irredeemable—and excludes them from decarceration efforts; and
- The severely constricted back-end systems of the criminal justice system, such as parole, clemency, and compassionate release, which systematically deny the release applications of people convicted of violent offenses.

These foundations of mass incarceration grow from and perpetuate the criminalization of Black and Latinx people and other oppressed communities, and have caused the number of aging people in U.S. prisons to skyrocket.

At the same time, RAPP recognizes a shifting national consciousness illustrating growing awareness of systemic social problems with race, class, policing and mass incarceration. In New York State, community advocacy has created a political climate that supports general prison population downsizing, and the parole board is under public and legislative pressure to modernize its practices.

Goals, Strategies, and Approach

Four core strategies and corresponding initiatives define RAPP's approach:

1. **Transform the punishment paradigm:** RAPP engages in a robust media and outreach strategy to transform the punishment paradigm—to move away from a system that relies on lifetime punishment towards one that offers second chances and relies on social resources and restorative justice to resolve conflict and promote public safety. We remain committed to working for the release of those most impacted by mass incarceration, especially elderly and

aging long-termers, many of whom pose little to no risk to public safety and should be released, as a foundation to broaden efforts to end mass incarceration.

2. **Build a base:** The RAPP Campaign mobilizes currently and formerly incarcerated people, their families, and other concerned community members; and works alongside other prison justice advocates to raise public awareness about the destructiveness of mass incarceration and the benefits to society in releasing aging people.
3. **Conduct legislative and policy advocacy:** RAPP initiates public and legislative forums and other activities to promote the use of key mechanisms for releasing elderly people such as parole, clemency, compassionate release, and policy changes.
4. **Develop the leadership of currently and formerly incarcerated people:** RAPP aims to conduct and promote leadership training for constituents who are served by its campaign, centering the leadership of those most directly impacted when advocating to end mass incarceration.

RAPP's Impact

- **Awareness of the harmful impact of the “punishment paradigm” and its disproportionate impact on those convicted of violent offenses:** Since launching in 2013, RAPP has played such a key role in challenging the punishment paradigm that in 2016 it was awarded the New York Media “Cause Award” for the Aging Population (<http://nynmedia.com/news/nyy-2016cause-awards>). A robust media strategy has led to RAPP’s work being featured nationally in media outlets including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Law Journal*, *The Associated Press*, *The Village Voice*, *The Washington Examiner*, *The Times Union*, *The Advocate*, *NY1 Television*, *International News Services*, *Democracy Now*, *CUNY TV*, and numerous radio broadcasts and online publications (please see RAPPCampaign.com/press). Challenging and transforming the “punishment paradigm” is foundational to broader efforts to end mass incarceration, as part of the road to abolition.

- **Support for decreasing the elderly prison population:** When RAPP was launched in 2013 there was almost no focus on decreasing the elderly prison population by using existing release mechanisms. While a number of reports had been issued detailing the problems associated with a growing elderly prison population, the solutions being promoted were essentially the expansion of health services and hospices inside. RAPP played a central role in promoting the cogent argument that the correct response to the crisis is the widespread release of people aging in prison, especially those who have already served lengthy sentences, are eligible for parole, and who are assessed low-risk to recidivate or to commit a crime if released.

- **Reunification services for aging people released from prison:** RAPP also works in coalition with groups and agencies that provide reentry services for people released from New York State prisons, and we advocate for specific programs for the elderly population. With others, we initiated the Aging Reentry Task Force of government and private organizations and agencies, some providing services for formerly incarcerated people. The Task Force has created what we think is the country’s first pilot project for discharge planning and reentry services for aging people released from prison. (See “*Aging in Prison: Reducing Elder Incarceration and Promoting Public Safety*” on RAPPCampaign.com/reports.)