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N.Y. must lift punitive practices of state's parole board

By Mujahid Farid, [Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP](#)
Commentary

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Across the nation there is growing concern that much of the progress made in the past five years educating the federal government on the harms associated with mass incarceration will be significantly turned back. Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency fuels that concern.

However, Trump's counter-progressive platform does not have the power to silence a movement whose time has come. Because the vast majority of incarcerated individuals are in state prison systems, not the federal system, the primary focal point for challenging mass incarceration must be at the local and state level, and at policies championed by so-called progressive politicians that long precede Trump.

Nationwide and local coalitions of formerly incarcerated men and women have been pushing a bold vision for justice and transformation for decades. Notably, in New York state, organizations and groups have been hard at work, creating and developing coalitions and coming out of their silos to address the crisis of a punishment paradigm that has threatened the health and well-being of New Yorkers and their families and communities since the Rockefeller administration.

Today, groups like the [Challenging Incarceration Coalition](#), which is made up of more than 60 organizations and issue-based campaigns, are demanding that Gov. Andrew Cuomo and leaders of the state Legislature join the movement to transform New York's racist carceral state and the rise of the newly emboldened conservative right by championing policy that ends mass incarceration, state violence and torture, racism and identity-based oppression, and empowers all New Yorkers, not just those who are convicted of nonviolent drug offenses.

As a start, the governor could take steps to uproot the punitive practices of the state Board of Parole, which continues to annually deny release to thousands of people — many of whom are elders — despite the incredible extent to which they have transformed over time.

I myself was denied by the board nine times, adding an extra 18 years to my original 15 years-to-life sentence, despite having already earned four college degrees — two bachelor's and two master's — before my first interview with the board.

To continue to deny people parole based on one immutable factor — the nature of the original offense — without regard for their life-changing transformations, is to follow the lead of the new president, not combat him. State and local organizations and individuals will not abandon inclusive reform efforts until the governor and Legislature act accordingly by changing the composition of the Board of Parole; passing the Safe and Fair Evaluations Parole Act (A.4353/S.3095A) which, among other things, requires that incarcerated people who are denied parole be told what corrective actions they need to take; and championing incarceration-related policy that ensures New York remains a steadfast leader in the dawn of a new and uncertain day.

The on-the-ground work being done by organizers and advocates on the state and local levels will not be uprooted by a new presidential administration, but it remains to be seen whether it will be embraced by the governor and his peers.

If the elected leaders of our state wish to rout the rise of the nationally occupying radical right, then they must join the local movement seeking to penetrate its punitive roots.