

New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault
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Testimony of Chrys Ballerano, New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Senate Parole Hearing
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I, Christine Ballerano, familiarly known as Chrys, am giving this testimony from a place of respect, compassion and deep empathy with people who have experienced interpersonal violence, and other traumatic forms of crime. As an advocate in the sexual assault movement for over twenty years, over nineteen serving as a statewide project director at NYS Coalition Against Sexual Assault, I've learned a great deal about the criminal justice system's approach to managing victims of crime and those who have done harm and violated the rights of survivors. As the statewide Sexual Assault and Mental Health Project Director since '99, I have heard countless testimonies from survivors for whom the criminal justice system brought no justice. Survivors from whom much was taken and not restored, or witnessed in any manner that brought healing for the traumatic injury that was caused.

And I'd like to share this statement from our organization's project team, which I shared earlier in our press conference:

"Too often the actions public officials take in the name of crime victims, particularly in the name of survivors of sexual and domestic violence, do not line up with the actual needs and desires of the majority of survivors, especially survivors from communities that are most at risk. As an organization committed to healing and justice for all survivors and to truly ending sexual violence, NYSCASA recognizes that reliance on a biased and inherently reactive criminal justice system will not achieve these goals. Like many survivors, we would rather see public officials take action to ensure that survivors, their families, and communities have the comprehensive resources they need to heal and to thrive; that significant investments are made in community services and institutions that will prevent violence from happening in the first place; that people who commit harm are held accountable in a meaningful way that does not perpetuate a cycle of violence; and that people who commit harm have access to the services they need to stop committing harm."

As a survivor of sexual child abuse by my paternal grandfather, a rape as an adolescent by a boyfriend I trusted, and sexual assault as a college freshman by a teacher, I know first-hand how these crimes go unspoken, unhealed, and ultimately made invisible. So you see, this issue is personal for me and I understand what my colleagues and other survivors refer to as a "rape culture". We continue to have powerful institutions that protect adults who harm kids, and even punish youth for the actions of adults. Although I know of efforts being made in some areas of service provision to be more trauma-informed, there is still a lack of cultural competence and far too great a propensity towards punishment and different forms of violence when a person is seen as non-compliant. Locally we all saw the tragic results of reactivity in the heartbreaking case of Dontay Ivy. We see this violence play out in victim blaming scenarios where bullying, blaming and harassment run rampant with people savagely disrespecting other people; at times this violence is even labelled as appropriate behavior by institutions set to maintain the status quo.

As a child, I didn't tell anyone about my sexual abuse because I didn't feel I had the power to speak up against my elder. What I do remember doing, again and again, is run to another elder, my maternal step-grandfather, James Rera, who I trusted implicitly and who loved me unconditionally. His love and protection of my spirit was one of the greatest assets of my childhood development. Grandpa Rera was also an ex-felon from before I was born, having as a minor, driven the get-away car for his older brothers' failed bank robbery. I didn't learn this fact about him until years later after he passed away. He had been offered an out from prison by serving in the military during World War II. He was always a man of great

dignity and love for others. My mother's older sister, my Aunt Fran described my grandpa as a "knight in shining armor", as she recalled his courtship of my grandma. As an uneducated Sicilian immigrant, my maternal grandmother had endured domestic violence in her first marriage, and had relied upon nuns to help her raise three young daughters during the depression, living in extreme poverty before marrying my Grandpa Rera. I recall Grandpa earning a good living as a union laborer and how beloved he was by his coworkers, friends and all of his family. After coming home from school as a child, I would run to his and my grandmother's house behind our home on LI to be with him in the garden, or watch him work in his garage or just run errands together in his pick-up truck for my family. He was my gentle giant protector and I loved him with all my heart. His elder brother was also very special to me and taught me how to fish as a young girl; treating me as a real person and not just as a little girl, giving me confidence in myself at a time when I was most vulnerable. I had the highest respect for these two men. I had no idea they'd each been convicted of felony crimes as young men. They remain, in my heart and memory, among my dearest mentors, and I cherish stories and photos that remain of them.

I would hate to see us moving backward and pre-judging people for eternity based upon their actions as youth. Taking away an individual's right to vote is another way of dehumanizing the most marginalized citizens of our nation, and as such, it is another form of violence. Such policy has no place in NYS. We should proudly model human rights, not exacerbate systematic oppression. Instead our policies should foster self-respect, healing and empathy and prepare incarcerated individuals to participate as citizens on the outside; not discard and disregard people as unworthy of dignity and civil rights. If Nelson Mandela can lead a Truth & Reconciliation Tribunal in post-apartheid S. Africa after suffering decades of brutal imprisonment, what stops us from honoring human rights for all people in the United States?

We also know that too many people living behind bars are themselves victims of violence, trauma and tremendous loss, as children, adolescents, and adults. Many are there for non-violent crimes that were survival strategies- the most accessible ways of coping with the traumatic pain they'd experienced as victims. These young people, like some of us in this room, may have used self-destructive behaviors like drugs and alcohol to get by, resulting in these survivors being criminalized for their coping strategies. We also know that those who serve the longest and harshest sentences for these offenses are poor and disproportionately people of color. Those early traumas, known as adverse childhood experiences or ACEs, are often exacerbated by the brutality experienced and witnessed while in prison, and the racism and implicit bias expressed in mainstream culture through our many institutionalized systems.

I have visited incarcerated survivors and know from what I've seen, how broken this system of mass incarceration is for families and individuals seeking healing and/or justice. I recall visiting with a female survivor of domestic and sexual violence, in Columbia County's jail in Hudson, while working as a rape crisis counselor at the REACH Center of Greene and Columbia counties. She refused to allow me to tell her family she was in jail because she didn't want them to see her that way- the shame she felt about them seeing her behind bars was too great for her to ask for support that she desperately needed; and as a crime victim, the subsequent isolation did nothing to help her heal from her trauma. Her crime was a relapse of cocaine use while on parole.

I could go on about Special Housing Units for survivors of sexual assault while in custody, and how this practice is the equivalent of torture, but I will stop here because I am about out of time. I'd like to thank you for listening to my testimony and NYSCASA's request to recognize the right to vote as a human right- that all people be counted as a human member of our troubled society. A society in great need of healing and restorative practices across all of our human service institutions, this criminal justice system, being just one. Anyone working with people needs to think of itself as "human services" or we endanger others by perpetuating pain and trauma instead of providing some form of corrections, restoration and healing, which we state is our intention. Increasing parole rates and granting voting rights are positive steps in that direction.