

PRESS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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***In Advance of State Senate Republican Parole Hearings,
Advocates Gather in Support of More Parole Board
Releases and Voting Rights for People on Parole***

***Advocates Rallied to Call Out Senate Republican Leadership's Racist Political
Agenda, Interference in Independent Parole Board Decisions and Peoples'
Right to Vote***

Albany, NY – October 1, 2018 – Today, a broad coalition of criminal justice advocates, formerly incarcerated people and community members gathered in advance of the NYS Senate Republican hearing on the State Parole Board's conduct and the Governor's restoration of voting rights to more than 24,000 people on parole.

Advocates stood in support of voting rights for all people and increases in Parole Board release rates despite strong opposition from some Republican Senators. Advocates called out the racist political tactics of many Senate Republicans attempting to demonize and attack currently and formerly incarcerated people for political purposes and before the November elections. Advocates said that Senate Republican-led hearings were not rooted in concerns for "public safety" or crime victims, but aimed at mobilizing their voting base in battleground Senate districts and scaring their constituency. Advocates said that the Parole Board should release more incarcerated people and that all people on parole should have the opportunity to vote, regardless of their crime. They stood with representatives of victims and survivors of crime to make clear that mass incarceration does not support healing, safety or justice for crime survivors and victims.

"New York State Senate Republican leaders need to stop playing political football with the lives of currently and formerly incarcerated people," **said Jose Hamza Saldana, Community Organizer with the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign.** "After 38 years in prison, four parole denials and having just voted for the first time in my life, these political optics are a direct attack on me, my family and all incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men and women. There are thousands of parole-eligible and community-ready people languishing in prisons across the state, some for over three decades. The Parole Board should release them instead of re-sentencing them to death by incarceration." **Saldana continued,** "Parolees are returning citizens. We were once a part of the problem but today and for a long time we have been an integral part of the solution. We are committed to working with faith and community-based organizations to develop viable strategies to address the social ills plaguing our communities. We will educate, organize, and advocate to retain our fundamental right to vote, and with the support of the community, we will vote our elders home. Let not one more of our elders die in prison."

"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,” said **Chrys Ballerano, Senior Director of the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault**. “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 Ranking Member of the Senate Crime Victims, Crime and Correction Committee, I fully support Governor Cuomo’s decision to restore voting rights to those who have paid their debt to society,” said **Senator Luis Sepulveda, who represents the 32nd District in the Bronx**. “They also need more supportive programs - and opportunities - to help put and keep them on a stable and productive footing.” **Sepulveda continued**, “I also believe it is time for a major overhaul of the state’s Parole Board, which the *New York Times* in an in-depth investigative report called “a broken system.” To that end, I, the Senate Democratic Conference and the Ranking Member of the Senate Health Committee plan to hold a public forum this November in New York City on the issue of Parole Board reform, in which we hope to address a number of issues, including racial disparity of its membership and inadequate reporting of specific details in assessing its decisions.”

“The National Action Network was honored to have Gov. Cuomo announce his executive order, granting conditional voting rights to over 35,000 people on parole in the state of New York at our National Convention,” said **Reverend Al Sharpton, President and Founder of National Action Network**. “We have fought and will continue to fight for every person’s fundamental right to vote, despite their history in the justice system. Mass incarceration has only served as a smokescreen for systematized oppression and racist practices. Taking away someone’s right to a voice in our democracy only furthers their disempowerment in a system that has already missserved them for too long. As citizens of their communities, they deserve a right to their voice. Voting and fair parole practices are pillars of a fair restorative and rehabilitative system of justice.”

“The majority of incarcerated older adults have completed or even developed many progressive programs that promote education, constructive and critical thinking, and pro-social behaviors for the betterment of the community,” said **James Royall, Re-Entry Advocate at Brooklyn Defender Services**. “Rejoining their families and being part of the fabric of society is paramount to them. These are the very individuals who, after release, continue to make tremendous contributions to our society, whether as entrepreneurs, mentors, or loving family members. The state must accelerate the release of these elderly people and uphold the voting rights of all those who are justice-involved.”

“Parole is not an institution that belongs swept up in the ever changing political wind. It is an important tool that allows society to acknowledge the completion of an individual’s sentence, and their capacity to have used their time within the correctional facilities to reflect and change,” said **Christopher E. Bromson, Executive Director of the Crime Victims Treatment Center and Co-Chair of the Downstate Coalition for Crime Victims**

Legislative Committee. “Just as victims have the capacity to heal, and can be offered support to move beyond the trauma of victimization, so too do offenders have the capacity to move beyond criminal behavior. Just as each survivor of a crime is an individual, so too is each incarcerated person. Policies barring the Parole Board from considering the important details of each individual case would exclude a vast number of survivors whose voices deserve to be heard. Many survivors view parole as a justified and appropriate end to an extremely painful experience.”

“These ill-timed hearings are clearly a political stunt orchestrated by Senate Republicans to score political points and to mobilize their voters prior to November's general elections,” **said State Senator Gustavo Rivera.** “They are being held to cast a cloud of doubt against incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, even after they have paid their debt to society and have been rehabilitated. As a legislator who is fighting relentlessly to reform our criminal justice system, I will continue to champion common sense measures, such as my bill to implement discretionary release as part of the parole process, so that our State can truly improve the parole system for both victims and incarcerated individuals.”

“If people have served their time inside, then they deserve the rights afforded to them on the outside. Voting is one of those rights,” **said Reverend Dr. Que English, Founder, NYC Clergy Roundtable.** “The system once again is looking for ways to keep our people in bondage while free. Instead of looking for ways to keep people from their rights, let’s work to improve and enhance opportunities, education, housing, and other important supports.”

“This week, the current majority in the State Senate will hold hearings to reinforce their position that the Parole Board releases too many people. It is a sad day when elected officials call a system broken because parole board members are increasingly fulfilling their sworn duty to uphold the law. Instead of this politically-driven attack, our legislators could work towards a more effective—and just—system,” **said Liz Gaynes, president and CEO of the Osborne Association.** “We must fill the seven empty seats on the Parole Board so that overloaded Commissioners can thoroughly consider the unique circumstances in each case; digitize records so that Commissioners need not travel long distances to review a single copy of paper records, in some cases just minutes before a hearing that is held by video-conference; and move to in-person parole hearings that are fully staffed by three commissioners. Our current televised but not digitized process makes it even more difficult to assess fully the person before them, leading to thousands of people facing repeated denials despite the wishes of prosecutors, sentencing judges, and in many cases, the victims themselves.”

“The politics of fear and the false connection between race, dangerousness, and criminality have served as obstacles to parole justice for far too long,” **said Anthony Thompson, Director of New York University Law Center on Race Inequality and the Law.** “We should be working to change that paradigm, and implementing reforms that help get people who have paid their debt to society and changed their lives for the better out of prison and successfully reintegrated into their communities. Unreasonably curtailing parole releases and silencing the political voices of those who have been released from prison is bad policy, guaranteed to reproduce the unfairness and injustice we should all stand against.”

“The Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC) supports people who are on parole to have the right to vote, and urges that New York release more people on parole,” **said Victor Pate, Community Organizer with the Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement.** “People who have served their time and been released on parole are New York citizens who should have an opportunity to vote for the representatives who make decisions affecting their and others’ lives. Regarding releases, for far too long the Parole Board has repeatedly denied release to those who have demonstrated their low risk, accomplishments and transformation, and readiness for release to the outside community. The Board needs to look at the people who sit before them and base their release decisions on evidence-based, forward-looking factors.”

“Denying me and others who have been justice-involved the right to vote does not help build communities,” **said Edwin Santana, Campaign Leader with JustLeadershipUSA.** “Restoring voting rights to people on parole provides a voice to those who have been disenfranchised by mass incarceration, overwhelmingly people of color. While Senate Republicans claim that the Parole Board has been "lenient," anyone paying attention knows the Board is finally taking baby steps in the right direction, but still has miles to go. As a person who lived through multiple parole denials, I have experienced their total disregard for rehabilitation and sheer uselessness of the system Senate Republicans are looking to re-impose. I say let's invest in forgiveness and healing in order to give our community the nurturing it needs to grow strong.”

“We need to trust our Parole Board professionals to release individuals who do not pose a threat to public safety,” **said Chief Brendan Cox (Ret.) Albany Police Department.** “We want them out of prison, contributing to society instead of costing us \$100 a day that could be reinvested into programs that prevent crime.”

“Parole must be decided based on criteria such as rehabilitation, remorse, and growth,” **said Allen Roskoff, President of the Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club.** “Republican Senators’ desire to base parole release solely on revenge and retribution is wrong. It shows a lack of understanding of human potential and degrades the value of human life and the very concept of humanity.”

“It is disgraceful that Senate Republicans continue to oppose the restoration of voting rights for people on parole,” **said Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause/NY.** “Do Senate Republicans also think Dean Skelos should be denied the right to vote when he's eventually paroled? Sheldon Silver? People on parole in New York deserve the right to vote, just like they do in many other states. It’s time for New York to catch up.”

“Limiting opportunities for people to fully engage in society based on their past mistakes makes little sense and is among the last vestiges of race-based voter suppression,” **said Avery Bizzell, Community Organizer with Community Service Society.** “Voting is the bedrock of democracy, the voice of the people. For individuals to successfully thrive in our communities, they must have the opportunity to vote and be fully empowered stakeholders.”

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