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Cuomo parole board nominees headed to Senate

By **NICK NIEDZWADEK** | 06/09/2017 05:05 AM EDT

The state Senate is set to consider a slate of gubernatorial nominees for the parole board more than six months after it came under fire for disparate treatment of white and non-white inmates.

Criminal justice reform advocates have been calling for wholesale changes at the parole board. As of last year just one of the board's commissioners was an African-American man and none was Latino. Advocates say that increasing the range of backgrounds — including geographic and career diversity, in addition to race and ethnicity — will render more equitable decisions from the board.

The five nominees are Caryne Demosthenes, Carol Shapiro, Tana Agostini, Erik Berliner and Tyece Drake, according to Senate and executive chamber officials. Demosthenes and Drake are African-American, and Agostini, a former Assembly policy staffer, is Latina.

The New York Times in December reported that fewer than one in six black or Latino men was released after their first eligible hearing versus one in four white men, among other disparities throughout the prison system.

Shortly thereafter Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat in his second term, quickly announced an investigation of racial bias in the state prison system. He also said he intended to nominate several minority candidates to the board.

“As with any board, we look for a diversity of experience and perspectives,” said Rich Azzopardi, a spokesman for the governor. “These nominees all have the qualifications to perform these critically important responsibilities and we await their confirmation.”

Sen. Kevin Parker, a Brooklyn Democrat who has been vocal on criminal justice reform, said the current board is overly stacked with members who have a background in law enforcement.

“Those are people who are trained to put people into jail,” he said. “They’re not necessarily best equipped or oriented toward making the evaluation of who should be getting out of jail.”

Azzopardi said additional appointments will be made in the near future.

Parker said he’s seen multiple lists of possible nominees, and called them a “step in the right direction” although he said he wanted more people with social work backgrounds and “people who understand what it takes to re-enter society.”

A diverse board can help ensure a sense of trust in the system, said Sen. Pat Gallivan of Erie County. Gallivan, a former parole board member, heads the Senate Crime Victims, Crime and Correction Committee that will vote on the nominees.

“It’s been my experience in dealing with criminal justice and law enforcement the more that the respective agency can reflect the population that it serves, it can reflect the diversity of the community it serves — often cases the more success that it has had,” he said.

But he added that the revamped board is not a panacea.

“A difference in the diversity of the board doesn’t mean there will be a difference in the results of parole board interviews,” he said. “The law is very clear in what the parole board must consider. There’s a set of factors the parole board must consider, then they take all of those factors and have to balance them against the standards of the law — the standards of release.”

Glenn Martin, the president and founder of JustLeadershipUSA, an organization advocating reduced prison populations, said New York’s parole system needs more substantial reforms.

“I think we need to totally incentivize how the parole board makes their decisions, and hold them accountable for their jobs,” he said. “I think they need more transparency for both their survivors of crime, the people who appear before the board, and the public.”

Members of the parole board, once confirmed by the Senate, serve six-year terms and can be re-appointed.

Jimmy Vielkind contributed to this report.