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***Advocates and Legislators Rally for State Parole Reforms in
Wake of Republicans' Calls for More Prison Time***

***Advocates Called for an End to Death By Incarceration
and the Release of Older People from Prison***

Albany, NY – May 14, 2019 – Today, state lawmakers and a broad coalition of advocates, victims' rights leaders, formerly incarcerated people and community leaders from the Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, Citizen Action of NY, New Hour for Women and Children Long Island, Osborne Association, Brooklyn Defenders Services, #HALTsolitary Campaign, VOCAL-NY and others gathered in support of broad reforms to the state's parole release process in the wake of republican lawmakers' calls to uphold mass incarceration with longer sentences and fewer parole releases.

The coalition called on the legislature and governor to support elder parole legislation (S2144) to establish a consideration of parole release for people aged 55 and older who have served 15 years or more in prison; fair and timely parole (S497) to ensure the parole release process is based on rehabilitation and individuals' current risk to public safety; and a fully staffed Parole Board with Commissioners who are social workers, psychologists, medical practitioners and other professionals who embrace redemption. Advocates called on lawmakers to end what many refer to as New York's new death penalty—death-by-incarceration, which combines long prison sentences with little opportunity for release and leads to mass aging and death in state prisons.

Jose Saldana, Director of the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, who served 38 years in prison and was released at 67 years old said, "Families of incarcerated people and Black and Latinx communities across New York State are united in supporting Fair and Timely Parole (S497), Elder Parole Bill (S2144) and our collective call for a fully staffed Parole Board with fair minded Commissioners. Collectively, these three initiatives create a humane, just and safe approach to ending mass incarceration in New York."

Luz Marquez Benbow of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice said, "For many survivors of crime from communities of color, communities that are financially disenfranchised and often overlooked, our voices have been missing from this critical dialogue about reform in NYS. We are the most harmed by violence and the criminal justice system. We want policies that work, not more punishment and incarceration, which is why we support parole justice. Mass incarceration has failed to meet the needs of crime victims or stop the cycle of crime. If we continue to respond to trauma with more trauma from punitive criminal justice measures, violence will continue to rise. We deserve a justice system that is effective and can truly make everyone safer."

State Senator Liz Krueger (SD-28) said, “Incarceration exists to deliver justice and uphold public safety. In general, elderly people in prison have very low rates of recidivism and do not present a threat to the public. It makes sense then that, after serving a significant sentence, they should be considered for parole, so we can at least ask the question of whether or not their continued incarceration furthers the interests of justice.”

State Senator Luis Sepulveda (SD-32) said, “As the chair of the Senate Committee on Crime Victims, Crime and Corrections, I feel it is my obligation to ensure that the New York State Legislature is taking the steps necessary to enact reforms that will end mass incarceration. Our prison system houses thousands of older men and women who no longer pose a threat to society. Incarcerating people who are safe to release is inhumane, unjust, and expensive. Anyone who has completed his or her minimum sentence or who has aged out of committing crimes and unlikely to recidivate should be given a chance to re-enter society. I also want to see a fully staffed Board of Parole with qualified commissioners who uphold values of mercy and justice instead of retribution and revenge.”

State Senator Brad Hoylman (SD-27) said, “New York’s new death penalty is death by incarceration. Over the last 20 years, the number of incarcerated older New Yorkers has more than doubled to over 10,000—even as the state’s overall prison population has fallen by 30 percent. Since January 2011, more than 1,000 incarcerated New Yorkers have died in prison. Many of them posed no risk to public safety. Incarcerated New Yorkers who have honestly confronted their crimes, accepted responsibility, demonstrated remorse, and shown proof of rehabilitation after years of punishment deserve an opportunity to return to society. Elder parole is the answer. I will continue to work with my Assembly co-sponsor David Weprin and Release Aging People in Prison in Albany to pass this bill. It is humane, it is responsible, and it is the right thing to do for New York.”

Rosemary Rivera, Co-Executive Director, Citizen Action of New York said, “Capital punishment was abolished in New York in 2007, yet we continue to sentence thousands of people to death-by-incarceration by denying them the opportunity for a meaningful parole hearing, or any parole hearing at all. This is unacceptable, inhumane and unjust. To end mass incarceration we have to reject systems of perpetual punishment. New York can start by passing the Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole bills this session.”

The Reverend Peter Cook, Executive Director of New York State Council of Churches said, “The purpose of our criminal justice system, in its best sense, is to rehabilitate people and help them return to society as citizens who are able to thrive and contribute their gifts and graces. These bills give people, who have truly embraced their rehabilitation, a much needed second look in the parole consideration process.”

“If we are intentional about ending mass incarceration we must take a second look at parole,” **said Serena Liguori, Executive Director of New Hour for Women and Children-Long Island.** “Parole practices remain archaic and unjust in their automatic and habitual denial of freedom. This disproportionately impacts people from Nassau and

Suffolk Counties, including the roughly 25 percent of Long Islanders serving life sentences in New York State prisons. Despite posing no risk to public safety, many continue to be denied their freedom after serving their minimum sentences. We oppose death by incarceration for our grandmothers, grandfathers and family members waiting to return home to give back to our communities.”

“While we have recently passed historic measures to reform our criminal justice system, we cannot stop there,” **said State Senator Gustavo Rivera (SD-33)**. “That’s why I will continue to champion common sense measures such as my bill to implement fairer discretionary release as part of the parole process. As a State, we must stand up and transform our system to ensure its true focus is on rehabilitation and justice.”

“Elder Parole is crucial to beginning reformation of New York’s criminal justice system,” **Assembly Member Patricia Fahy (AD-109) said** “Requiring that seniors in prison over the age of 55 who have served at least 15 years with good behavior simply receive a hearing before the parole board takes a measured approach to reevaluating the risk posed by certain elderly incarcerated individuals. With a number of vacancies on the state parole board, ensuring that the rehabilitation of each individual is fairly evaluated by the state is especially imperative.”

Assembly Member Robert Carroll (AD-44) said, “Indeterminate sentences and determinant sentences of extreme length are death sentences by another name. Providing a pathway towards parole for individuals who have served more than 15 years and are older than 55 is a just and humane step in reforming our broken criminal justices system. The vast majority of these individuals are no longer a threat to society and have paid a large debt for the crimes they have committed. I am proud to stand with Release Aging People in Prison and my colleagues in calling on the state to reform our parole process for aging people in prison.”

State Senator Jamaal Bailey (SD-36) said, “Currently, our parole system is a gateway to being re-incarcerated, instead of a rehabilitative process. Incarcerated individuals should have the opportunity for parole. If the board was fully staffed, there would be a greater opportunity to have more voices heard, potentially allowing people to return home and reinvest in their communities. We need to fully staff the parole board with qualified, diverse, and fair candidates. This would be another important step in remedying mass incarceration in New York State.”

“When someone has served their time for mistakes made in the past, the decision on their parole should not stretch endlessly into the future,” **said State Senator Zellnor Myrie (SD-20)**. “These essential reforms will move us closer to a justice system that will affirm the dignity and humanity of returning citizens and give them a fair and timely chance to begin again.”

“For the past five decades, we have conducted a huge prison experiment with millions of human lives lost and million more lives hanging in the balance. The majority of people in the United States want mass incarceration to end and New Yorkers want the same.

Passing Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole, and fully staffing the Parole Board with qualified candidates are three clear ways to do just that,” **said Anthony Dixon Director of Community Engagement of the Parole Preparation Project.**

“Any real effort to address mass incarceration inevitably must deal with the antiquated New York State parole system”, says **Liz Gaynes, CEO and President of the Osborne Association.** “Too many of our fellow citizens are not getting a fair opportunity to come home and are languishing in prison at great expense to New York taxpayers. The understaffing of the State Board of Parole does not allow for a proper and efficient administration for the thousands of cases that come up for review each year to the detriment of so many families and communities. We must also address the aging population in our prisons. These individuals pose virtually no risk to public safety. They are remorseful and have transformed their lives from past acts that occurred many decades ago. The Elder and Fair and Timely bills address this head on and we support their passage.”

State Senator Julia Salazar (SD-18) said, “Our state’s mass incarceration system is currently holding tens of thousands of people, including many seniors, who do not pose any threat to society. It is inexcusable that the New York State Parole Board is not fully staffed and I urge Governor Cuomo to appoint new Commissioners. We must also pass legislation to reform the parole process using the principles of restorative justice.”

Naomi Jaffe, Capital Area Against Mass Incarceration said, “Contrary to the myth, mass incarceration is not just a downstate problem. It is equally devastating to our upstate New York communities, and it can't be fixed without fixing the injustice of a parole system that keeps people behind bars who are no danger but instead could be an asset to their families and communities. Staffing the parole board with fairer commissioners, giving elders a chance at parole, and requiring the parole board to base evaluations on current risk would go a long way toward replacing a system of revenge and punishment with one that nurtures rehabilitation.”

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