

****PRESS RELEASE****

[Full Recording of Press Conference Here](#)

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Amid COVID Surge and State Fiscal Crisis, Lawmakers, Victim and Survivor Advocates, and Families Impacted by Incarceration Hold Virtual Rally to Save Lives and Save Money by Passing Parole Reform

600 Advocates and Legislators from Long Island to Western New York Call for Passage of the People's Campaign for Parole Justice Platform

(New York) -- January 27, 2020 -- Today, amid a state fiscal crisis and COVID surge behind bars, hundreds of families impacted by incarceration, victim and survivor advocates, and legislators from across New York State gathered virtually to call for the passage of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills, the legislative platform of the People's Campaign for Parole Justice. [Watch a full recording of the press conference here](#). Together, these bills will save money and save lives. The campaign has the support of more than 250 organizations and groups across New York State. The bills will promote fair and meaningful release opportunities for rehabilitated people in New York State prisons, reunite New York families, and enable the state to redirect millions of dollars wasted on mass incarceration to invest in resources that actually improve community health and safety.

Speakers at the press conference said the following:

“New York's laws have endlessly focused on criminalizing and incarcerating Black, brown, immigrant, and low-income communities. We have an obligation to pass legislation that will systematically reform our State's parole system including my Fair and Timely Parole bill,” said **State Senator Gustavo Rivera, Fair & Timely Parole sponsor**. “Today, I am proud to join my colleagues, members and allies of the People's Campaign for Parole Justice, and those New Yorkers impacted by our State's prison system as we renew our commitment to end the scourge of mass incarceration that is bleeding our communities dry.”

Rachel Herzog, an advocate with the Crime Victims Treatment Center, said: “At the Crime Victims Treatment Center we believe that everyone has the capacity for change and growth. Parole in New York does not recognize those capacities. That's why we support these bills.”

NYS Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa, lead sponsor of Elder Parole, said: “I am proud to carry Elder Parole, and to support Fair and Timely Parole. In the grips of a pandemic, we have seen that our most vulnerable, incarcerated elders have died of COVID. There is no plan. We must act to bring justice.”

“As an adult survivor who has devoted my time to personal healing and ending child sexual abuse and all forms of sexual violence throughout the United States, particularly for survivors of color, I know that we cannot end violence with more violence and then call it justice. Despite what you see on TV, justice is not attained in the courtroom or by locking someone up for years. I stand here today to say, not in my name, as a survivor, will you continue to keep human beings separated from their families and locked up in prison, especially the elderly during this moment of a global pandemic,” said **Luz Marquez Benbow, survivor of child sexual abuse**.

NYS Senator Brad Hoylman, sponsor of Elder Parole and Chair of the Judiciary Committee, said: “It is a moral imperative that our correctional system offer incarcerated people a meaningful opportunity for rehabilitation and reentry into their communities. Passing my elder parole legislation with

Assemblymember De La Rosa (S.15/A.3475) would give that opportunity to our incarcerated seniors. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, elder incarcerated people are the most at risk of dying behind bars and at the same time have the lowest rates of recidivism. Let's pass elder parole and save lives, reunite families and offer equal access to justice to New Yorkers of all races. Thank you again to RAPP and the Campaign for Parole Justice for fighting for what's right and just."

NYS Crime Victims, Crime and Correction Committee Chair State Senator Julia Salazar said: "The incarceration system is not repairing harm for survivors, and is too often perpetuating and creating harm and violence. It's absolutely critical that we pass Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole."

NYS Assembly Correction Committee Chair and Fair & Timely Parole sponsor David Weprin said, "As the Chairman of the New York State Assembly Correction Committee, I am proud to join the People's Campaign for Parole Justice on their virtual advocacy day. In the NYS Assembly I introduced the bill for Fair and Timely Parole. This bill is for people who have completed the minimum terms of incarceration and do not pose a threat to others. They should be considered for parole and community supervision. Criminal justice reform is essential at this moment with COVID-19 spreading rampantly throughout correctional facilities. I will continue to fight to reform outdated criminal justice statutes. I applaud the People's Campaign for Parole Justice for bringing awareness to this issue by organizing this event."

"For far too long too many families have suffered under unnecessary mass incarceration. Many people who have done their time and demonstrated their redemption have been denied parole. This is cruel and inhumane," said **NYS Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes**. "I stand with the People's Campaign for Parole Justice and my fellow lawmakers in calling for an end to this inhumane and unjust practice. The time is now for Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole Reform."

Jose Saldana, Director of the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign/RAPP, said: "We need these bills passed. We need parole justice. We need to stop the vengeance and promote healing. It's time for Albany lawmakers to pass the Elder Parole bill and Fair and Timely Parole Act."

NY State Senator Rachel May said: "My grandfather was an anti-death penalty activist. Now as his granddaughter, it's time that we look at the whole system. That's why I'm such a strong supporter of Fair and Timely Parole, and Elder Parole."

VOCAL-NY Member Billy Booker said: "I served 37 years in prison. I earned degrees. I fought long and hard for my freedom. There are so many elderly people in prison who accomplished what I have but they're not getting a chance at release."

The New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NYSCASA) shared the following statement: "NYSCASA believes that prison justice is survivor justice. Meaningful parole reform could provide an important opportunity for incarcerated and criminalized survivors to access healing justice and community supports that are not available to them in New York's prisons and jails. NYSCASA supports efforts for meaningful parole reform. We believe and know that each of us is more than the worst action we've committed in our lives. Incarcerated people should have access to the possibility of parole if they have demonstrated personal transformation and no longer pose a threat of committing further harm. This is particularly of urgent concern when considering elderly individuals currently locked within our state prisons, whose sentences may preclude them from parole eligibility. Locking people up until they grow old, infirm, or die does not keep victims, or any of us, safe and certainly does not deter crime or promote the well-being of survivors."

"As COVID infection rates continue to rise in prisons, and plans to vaccinate incarcerated New Yorkers remains unknown, it is critical that we move to create meaningful opportunities for our vulnerable elders to be released. As a matter of public health and stemming the tide of the virus, New York State must heed the advice of health experts and take immediate action to decarcerate," said **State Senator Alessandra Biaggi (D-Bronx/Westchester)**.

BACKGROUND: The People’s Campaign for Parole Justice is a new, statewide, grassroots campaign pushing for parole reform in New York State. The campaign platform is supported by more than 250 organizations across New York State and led by a coalition of the state’s biggest and most influential social justice and criminal justice groups, including the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, VOCAL-NY, Citizen Action, New Hour for Women and Children, NY Communities for Change, Center for Community Alternatives, Capitol Area Against Mass Incarceration, Osborne Association, NY Civil Liberties Union, FWD.us, #HALTsolitary Campaign, Legal Aid Society, Center for Justice at Columbia, CUNY Law Defenders Clinic, NYU Law’s Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law.

[COVID-19 is worsening in NY State prisons. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 4,500 people incarcerated in prisons have tested positive for COVID-19 \(over 1,000 in the past month\).](#) Thirty incarcerated people have died of COVID so far, including 12 deaths in the last five weeks alone. There are currently outbreaks of the virus at Attica, Albion, Bedford Hills, Coxsackie, Bare Hill, Clinton, Woodbourne, Groveland, Cayuga, and Walsh Correctional Facilities.

The People’s Campaign for Parole Justice is calling on lawmakers in Albany to pass two bills that will address this pandemic behind bars and prevent similar tragedies in the future:

- [Elder Parole \(S.15/A.3475\)](#) would allow the State Board of Parole to provide an evaluation for potential parole release to incarcerated people aged 55 and older who have already served 15 or more years, including some of the state’s oldest and sickest incarcerated people.
- [Fair and Timely Parole \(S.1415\)](#) would provide more meaningful parole reviews for incarcerated people who are already parole eligible.

The Campaign is also calling on Governor Cuomo to fully staff the Parole Board with 19 Commissioners who come from communities that have been directly affected by mass incarceration and come from professional and clinical backgrounds including social work, nursing, reentry services, and other fields that allow them to evaluate incarcerated people for who they are today. The Board currently has three vacancies.

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