

****PRESS RELEASE****

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**FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN AND LEADING GENDER JUSTICE ADVOCATES
JOIN NY STATE LAWMAKERS IN WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH VIRTUAL PRESS
CONFERENCE IN SUPPORT OF PAROLE REFORM**

*PARTICIPANTS CALLED FOR PASSAGE OF ELDER PAROLE AND FAIR & TIMELY PAROLE BILLS
AS PART OF 'PAROLE JUSTICE IS GENDER JUSTICE' ADVOCACY DAY*

(New York) -- Today, in honor of Women's History Month, formerly incarcerated women and gender non-conforming people, leading gender justice advocates, and NY State lawmakers held a virtual press conference as part of a *Prison isn't Feminist: Parole Justice is Gender Justice* advocacy day. Speakers demanded justice for all women and gender non-conforming people behind bars, particularly women of color and trans women, and continued the fight for parole reform. The day was organized by New Hour for Women and Children - Long Island, along with the People's Campaign for Parole Justice, a grassroots campaign backed by nearly 300 groups across New York State advocating for passage of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills, as well as a fair and fully staffed Parole Board.

Sherika Stewart (Long Island), Community Leader with New Hour for Women and Children—LI said, "I am formerly incarcerated and the partner of someone currently incarcerated. Before any prison program was created, it was the women who were around me who helped me understand my personal issues. Most women are in prison because of abuse or trauma they suffered. Elderly people are left inside and they still mentor people in prison out of the good of their hearts. But they could be out here. They could be mentoring young people. You have all the leaders and teachers who care about young people incarcerated."

Roslyn Smith (Brooklyn), formerly incarcerated community leader and a member of V-Day said, "My co-defendant, Valerie Gaiter died in prison. She served over 40 years. If the Fair and Timely and Elder Parole bills were in place, Valerie would not have died, she would have been home and gotten the medical treatment she needed for her illness. Her death was unnecessary. Valerie's life was so meaningful. She helped so many women in prison get on the right track. But she was left behind and she didn't have to be. These bills are so important because the majority of people who have spent 15 or more years in prison have changed and shown their ability to be productive citizens. A lot of them have created programs while inside and, if these two bills were passed, would be going home to start non-profit organizations and businesses that support the community and change people's lives."

State Senator Julia Salazar (Brooklyn), Chair of the Senate Committee on Crime Victims, Crime, and Correction said, "There are people of all genders in NY State prisons who are subjected to more violence because of their gender. These are all issues that can be addressed through decarceration, and that is what Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole are about. There are far too many people incarcerated in New York State. It is doing far more harm than good. It doesn't need to be this way. We have so much work to do so that we can see justice and redemption in our state. This is about fighting against gender-based violence, and gender-based discrimination."

State Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa (Manhattan), lead sponsor of the Elder Parole bill said, "Mass incarceration is violence against women, trans women, and women of color. And every single day women in our communities work to move the needle forward on social justice. Passing Elder and Fair

& Timely Parole is one of the greatest things we can do as a state. We know that parole justice will ensure that women are reunited with their families. That they will be able to leave a situation where they are absolutely oppressed and reunite with a family who is waiting for them with open arms.”

Donna Robinson (Buffalo), Western NY Buffalo Community Organizer with the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign said, “There are women who are incarcerated that are as old as my mother. I see no sense in that. It is tragic and doesn’t speak well for we who call ourselves the empire state. I, like so many, who have loved ones that are ready to come home, am begging you, I am imploring you to co-sponsor the Fair and Timely and Elder Parole bills and stand on the right side of justice. No one is irredeemable. Everyone is worthy of redemption.”

Pam Neely (Long Island), a member with New Hour for Women and Children–LI said, “ We’re not asking you to free everyone, we’re asking you to give them a chance to prove they’re transformed themselves. The incarcerated women who are working together to create programs to mentor and rehabilitate their community inside the best way they can deserve a chance, an opportunity to go before the Parole Board and be looked at for what they’ve done in all their years of incarceration, not the one thing they did, the crime that ended them up incarcerated.”

Laura Whitehorn (Manhattan) Co-Founder, Release Aging People in Prison said, “The reason we’re here talking about these bills is because we know the people eligible for parole, we know the people who aren’t going to be eligible for parole because they have too long of a sentence, who will die before they even appear before the parole board. We know that they’re not only ready to be released, but must be released if we want people to come out into society and deal with damage and violence. We know that people who have committed crimes, violent crimes like mine, know more in our hearts, have gone through more grief for the pain that we have caused to others than any people on the Parole Board could ever know. We know that our mentors from inside are ready to come out and be mentors. We know that not only are prisons not feminist, they create more violence towards women and communities. Prisons and police do not keep Black and Brown, and poor communities safe. We have to create something different for public safety and public welfare.”

State Senator Alessandra Biaggi (Bronx) said, “I am grateful that we are centering women, and women in correctional facilities. During Women’s History Month, it is our responsibility as lawmakers to uplift the voices of women and gender non-conforming people that have been directly impacted by parole injustice. We also have to recognize how women have led in our county, and specifically how women of color have led in support of the criminal justice reform movement. You can count me in as a yes vote, no matter what, for Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole.”

Miriam Lopez (Long Island), Community Leader with New Hour for Women & Children–LI, said, “I spent 30 years in prison after being sentenced to 20 years to life. I was denied parole for 10 years. I will be 55 years old and no one is harder on me than myself. I can only change myself because I can’t change my crime. My crime should not define me, the Miriam who I am today.”

Tamika Graham (Staten Island), community leader with Center for Community Alternatives, said, “I survived the chains and the cages, the trauma, and the dehumanizing treatment of incarceration in New York state prisons. But I was one of the lucky ones, I was eventually able to walk out of prison and claim my life back. But at age 61, the lifeless body of my friend Valerie Gaiter was carried out. Because of the harsh laws governing parole in New York State, she was never given the chance to show that her life and freedom had meaning and purpose.”

Assembly Member Chantel Jackson (Bronx) said, “I’ve spent a lot of time visiting family at a number of facilities. I have a lot of personal stories when it comes to people who have been incarcerated, and why these bills are extremely important. I saw enough to know that no one should have to go through this.”

Assembly Member Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas (Queens) said, “I am in my forties, and in the last four decades the rate of incarceration for women has gone up 834 percent. Right now, 55 percent of women in NY State prisons are Black and Latinx. One of the first things I got to do as an Assembly Member was visit Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. We spoke with dozens of incarcerated women. We have to pass these laws. We have to get Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole done. I am committed.”

Senator Samra Brouk (Rochester) said, “The impacts of mass incarceration have been devastating for our communities, and in particular, for communities of color. The Fair and Timely Parole Act would reform the parole system to change the way that people are evaluated for parole release. Currently, incarcerated people can be denied parole based solely on their conviction; this bill would instead center a person’s accomplishments, their rehabilitation, and—crucially—their redemption, factors that provide a much more holistic view of an individual. We are not the worst thing we’ve ever done. Repeated parole denials have left thousands of New Yorkers with little hope for release from prison, denying them the opportunity to be home with their families and make positive contributions to their communities. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the Senate to make the Fair and Timely Parole Act a reality and bring hope back to incarcerated individuals and their families across the state.”

Assembly Member Linda B. Rosenthal (Manhattan) said, “With one of five incarcerated women over the age of 50 and 46 percent of those behind bars for parole-eligible offenses, it’s about time that we start talking about parole justice as a matter of gender justice. Women, trans women and women of color often suffer severe sexual and other trauma while incarcerated, and it is vital that we take action now to implement fair and timely parole for elders who have served a meaningful portion of their time.”

BACKGROUND: There are currently 1,138 people identified by NYS DOCCS as women incarcerated in New York, of whom 54.9% are people of color, Black, and/or Latinx. Within this population and across the prison system, there many people who are made invisible by DOCCS’ inability to recognize their gender as well as people who cannot disclose their gender identity for reasons of safety. Women, gender non-conforming people, and transgender people are deeply impacted by parole injustice as part of a continuum of gender-based oppression. Surveys show the vast majority are survivors of trauma and abuse. In 2019, the longest-serving woman in New York State prison, Valerie Gaiter, [died of an illness behind bars at age 61](#) after 40 years in prison. She would not have been eligible for parole consideration for another decade, despite having completely transformed and turned her life around many years prior. More recently, [Lulu Benson-Saey became the first woman to die of COVID-19 behind bars](#) in New York, also at age 61. Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole would have given both of these women a meaningful opportunity for parole release.

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 nearly 300 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, NYCLU, [FWD.us](#), #HALTsolitary Campaign, Legal Aid Society, Center for Justice at Columbia, CUNY Law Defenders Clinic, and NYU Law’s Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law.

Racism infects the parole release system just as it does every element of the criminal legal system. A white person in a New York prison is significantly more likely on average to be released on parole than a Black or Latinx person and the disparity widened in 2020, according to a [Times Union analysis](#) of the nearly 19,000 parole board decisions over the last two years. The data, which spans October 2018 through October 2020, shows the Parole Board granted parole release to 41 percent of white people, compared to 34 percent of Black people and 33 percent of Latinx people. Importantly, these racial disparities are not new. In 2016, the [New York Times conducted an investigation](#) of parole release data and similarly found Black and Latinx people were significantly less likely to be released than their white counterparts.

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 \(S.1415/A.4231\)](#) 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 who have professional and clinical backgrounds in areas such as 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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