

## PRESS RELEASE

**FULL ZOOM [RECORDING OF PRESS CONFERENCE HERE](#)**

Contact: TeAna Taylor, (518) 847-5497, [taylorteana@gmail.com](mailto:taylorteana@gmail.com)

### **AFTER VISITING NY WOMEN'S PRISONS, STATE LAWMAKERS JOIN ADVOCATES FOR WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH PRESS CONFERENCE IN SUPPORT OF JUSTICE REFORMS**

### **THE GROUP CALLS ON LEGISLATURE TO PASS PAROLE REFORMS, DEMANDS GOV. CUOMO SIGN THE HALT SOLITARY CONFINEMENT ACT, AND CALLS FOR OTHER JUSTICE REFORMS**

**(New York)** -- After visiting Bedford Hills and Albion women's prisons, four state lawmakers hosted a Women's History Month virtual press conference to call for urgent justice reforms alongside formerly incarcerated women who served time at both facilities and are advocates with New Hour for Women and Children – LI, the People's Campaign for Parole Justice, the #HALTsolitary Campaign, VOCAL-NY, and the Justice Roadmap. Speakers reported back on women denied meaningful parole release opportunities, women locked in solitary confinement, the devastating impact of the moratorium on visiting, and more, urging the legislature to pass Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole and the Governor to sign the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, as well as urging DOCCS to restore visitation and programs and improve conditions.

**Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa (Manhattan), who recently visited Bedford Hills prison,** said: "I want to be very clear that we are calling on Governor Cuomo to do the right thing and sign the HALT bill. If we truly believe that people deserve dignity wherever they are, then we must stop state-sanctioned torture. Women at Bedford Hills prison are being punished for being survivors. We should be helping these women, not tearing them down. We need to understand that parole justice is gender justice. We must pass Fair and Timely Parole and Elder Parole and give these women the opportunity to prove their transformation and be reunited with their families."

**Assembly Member Sarah Clark (Rochester area), who recently visited Albion prison,** said: "When I visited Albion Correctional Facility, the human toll of solitary confinement on women there was hard to hear about and watch. HALT needs to be signed immediately. We are not putting our resources where they need to be. We need to change this entire incarceration system. We can start with Fair and Timely Parole, finally getting the Governor to sign HALT, and more."

**Roslyn Smith (Brooklyn), formerly incarcerated community leader with the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign,** said: "I did 39 years in Bedford Hills prison. My co-defendant, Valerie Gaiter, died in prison after being misdiagnosed. She had cancer and they said she had acid reflux. If Elder Parole passed, she likely would

have been released. The first woman who died from COVID in NY State prison was in Bedford Hills. I knew her. The Elder Parole bill and the Fair and Timely Parole bill needs to pass. The Legislature needs to pass them. We have a chance to make history. Parole justice is gender justice.”

**Janice Lee (Long Island), a formerly incarcerated member of New Hour for Women and Children-LI**, said: “I served 17.5 years. I was denied parole twice. I was incarcerated for substance abuse. The prison had nothing for me. I feel so sorry for the women incarcerated right now during COVID. Mothers need to see their children. Their children give them strength. I lived for visits. Please support these bills so women can see their families and so that elders can have a chance.”

**Assembly Member Karines Reyes (Bronx), who recently visited Bedford Hills prison**, said: “When we met these women, it was clear that all they care about is being released, being with their families, and seeing their children. They are intelligent, brave, and filled with life even in their circumstances. There was a woman in solitary confinement for protective custody. She was frustrated because a lot of the programs she was hoping to take to get released early weren't available to her. We visited the regional medical unit where we met with elderly women. These women aren't a risk to anyone's safety. They're your grandmother in a wheelchair. We're not keeping anyone safe when we keep elderly & sick women behind bars. They should be released.”

**Assembly Member Demond Meeks (Rochester), who recently visited Albion prison**, said: “We have to go full-throttle with respect to legislation. The treatment is absolutely inhumane. We spoke with a sister who has not seen a gynecologist in 2.5 years. We spoke with someone who deals with a heavy menstrual cycle. They refuse to supply her with the proper pads. Some had not seen a dentist in several years, at least two years. We also spoke to a trans man. He had been approved for his surgery almost three years ago. He's still waiting, totally being neglected. One of the doctors told him, 'You should have remained a girl.' These are the types of things that people are experiencing. I also visited the solitary confinement unit at Albion. We heard that there was a person who was placed in solitary confinement who had a mental illness. Eventually, they were found hanging in her cell. She was pronounced dead a week later.”

**Eileen Maher (Brooklyn), a VOCAL-NY Leader**, said: “I am a criminalized survivor of domestic violence. I was mostly incarcerated at Albion prison and suffered from serious health conditions, but the doctors I saw got their licenses from the back of a Cracker Jack box. I had a terrible experience with dental care, too. I went for a filling. The dentist demanded to pull a bunch of teeth. Good teeth. I refused. And then when I got home from prison, I went to my dentist because of toothaches. He found the other dentist had drilled holes in my teeth.”

**Sherika Stewart (Long Island), a member of New Hour for Women and Children - LI**, said: “Prison took away my personhood. I became a DIN number. But I had all these great women who came before me to teach me how to navigate this world. And now I'm home and doing really well. I'm bossed up. But my emotions are not. The women who mentored me, who do a better job than any professional therapist, they're still

incarcerated. Now that I'm with New Hour, I know these are policy problems and I can help fix them."

**Anitria Blue (Long Island), a member of New Hour for Women and Children - LI,** said: "I am a domestic violence survivor. As a result of trying to protect myself, I spent 17.5 years in prison. I spent time in both Bedford Hills and Albion prison. My mental health really suffered in prison. We need to pass Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole and HALT so that these women have a second chance, and to give our communities hope."

**Casey (Albany), a VOCAL-NY member,** said: "I struggled with mental health and substance abuse issues. People need access to treatment in prison. A lot of people struggle with substance use, Many overdose and die. It's really important that we give services to women."

**BACKGROUND:** There are currently 1,165 people identified by NYS DOCCS as women incarcerated in New York, the majority are Black and/or Latinx. Within this population and across the prison system, there are 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 expansive 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. 8 out of 10 women in NYS prisons are mothers and children have not been allowed to visit their mothers behind bars for months.

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.

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.

In addition, the #HALTsolitary Campaign is advocating for Governor Andrew Cuomo to sign [The Humane Alternatives to Long-Term \(HALT\) Solitary Confinement Act \(S2836/A2277A\)](#), which passed in the Legislature with supermajority support last week. The bill would end the torture of prolonged solitary confinement and replace it with more humane and effective alternatives.

###