

****PRESS RELEASE****

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FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN JOINED NYS LEGISLATORS AT WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH RALLY OUTSIDE BEDFORD HILLS PRISON TO SUPPORT ALL WOMEN BEHIND BARS, PARTICULARLY WOMEN OF COLOR AND TRANS WOMEN

*PARTICIPANTS CALLED FOR PASSAGE OF ELDER PAROLE AND FAIR &
TIMELY PAROLE BILLS AS PART OF 'PAROLE JUSTICE IS GENDER
JUSTICE' PUSH, AS WELL AS THE HALT SOLITARY BILL AND
RESTORATION OF VISITS*

(Bedford Hills, NY) -- Today, in honor of Women's History Month, formerly incarcerated women and other advocates joined legislators in a rally outside Bedford Hills prison in Westchester to support all women behind bars, particularly women of color and trans women, and continue the fight for parole justice and more. The rally was organized by New Hour for Women and Children - LI and [Women 2 Women](#), 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. Participants also called for passage of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act and the restoration of prison visits so children can see their parents.

Speakers at the rally said the following:

Serena Liguori, Executive Director of New Hour for Women and Children - LI, said: "New Hour stands today with all incarcerated survivors, advocating for Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole. We are urging the restoration of visits for mothers and grandmothers behind bars and for humane and fair treatment for all women. We believe in the value of human life and are advocating today for those who, without these needed reforms, will likely die behind bars."

Jenny Convery, a volunteer with Woman 2 Woman, which connects women in the community with women incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility to provide emotional support and friendship, said: "I've spent years visiting a woman in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility through Woman to Woman. My experience brought home to me that no one should be judged for a lifetime on what they did on their worst day, and everyone is worthy of compassion."

Miyhosi Benton, Associate Director of Advocacy & Strategy, Women & Justice Project, said: "Today, we stand in solidarity with our sisters and siblings on both sides of the wall. Prisons have always prioritized punishment and control over safety and lives, and do not allow for transformation, healing or true accountability. This month marks the one-year anniversary of the COVID pandemic. One year that our people have been needlessly suffering. While we continue the ongoing work to fundamentally transform how our society responds to harm, New York State must immediately take steps to respond to the crisis happening behind the walls. We must stop turning our backs on our people. Enough is enough."

Sammie Werkheiser, co-founder on Mothers on the Inside and organizer with the #HALTsolitary Campaign, said: "Over time Valerie Gaiter became one of my best friends. She was closing in on a 40 year sentence. I was amazed at how much she accomplished during her

time. She wanted to be the best person she could be. She never believed she wouldn't get out of prison one day but her life was needlessly lost behind bars."

Donna Robinson, Release Aging People in Prison Campaign's Western New York organizer, said: "This is the cry of every woman behind that wall. Stop the shenanigans in New York State. Pass Fair & Timely Parole, pass Elder Parole, and fully staff that parole board. It's been too long since my daughter, and others who have been held hostage there, have held their loved ones. They are not a threat to public safety. But what is going on behind those walls is a threat to public health. The governor of New York State says it's not an issue. He's mandated vaccines for the homeless shelters, for the drug rehab centers, for the nursing homes. But incarcerated people? No. My daughter and everyone there with an indeterminate sentence was not sentenced to death."

Sharon White-Harrigan, Executive Director at the Women's Community Justice Association, said: "What about her? What about all our sisters locked up behind us? What about our elders? We're here demanding that all elected officials show human decency for every single woman and anyone who identifies as a woman who is locked up in the prisons."

Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas said: "Assemblymembers Septimo and Mamdani and I visited Bedford Hills and we met moms, we met daughters, we met sisters, we met grandmothers, we met women who I believe strongly should not be in cages. The campaign to pass Fair & Timely Parole, Elder Parole, and have a fully staffed parole board is at the intersection of our fight for racial justice, for gender justice, and to take care of our elders. We know that nearly 25% of people in New York State prisons are aged 50 or older and we know the vast majority of incarcerated people are Black and brown. So we need to fight for Elder Parole. We need to fight for Fair & Timely Parole."

Assembly Member Zohran K. Mamdani said: "Last month, I visited Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. There, I met Martha — a 65-year-old woman who works in the prison library. She needs a cane to walk. I also met Cindy, a 63-year-old survivor of domestic violence, who has been at Bedford for 11 years, with 9 more years left on her sentence. She needs a walker just to get around. Our elders should not be in prison. Survivors should not be in prison. A society cannot be just with an unjust carceral system. These measures — Elder Parole, Fair & Timely Parole bill, and a fair and fully staffed Parole Board — are steps towards justice for those incarcerated like Martha & Cindy."

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 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—LI, 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.

In addition, the #HALTsolitary Campaign is advocating for [The Humane Alternatives to Long-Term \(HALT\) Solitary Confinement Act \(S2836/A2277A\)](#), which would end the torture of prolonged solitary confinement and replace it with more humane and effective alternatives.

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