

**\*\*PRESS RELEASE\*\***

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Contact: Jared Chausow, [jchausow@gmail.com](mailto:jchausow@gmail.com), 650 814 0565  
TeAna Taylor; [taylor-teana@gmail.com](mailto:taylor-teana@gmail.com); 518-847-5497

**FAITH LEADERS, FORMERLY INCARCERATED ADVOCATES &  
LEGISLATORS FROM ACROSS NY STATE MARK NATIONAL  
“SECOND CHANCE” MONTH WITH CALL FOR PAROLE REFORM**

*PARTICIPANTS HIGHLIGHT THE MORAL NEED TO ENSURE PRISON  
RELEASE DETERMINATIONS ARE ROOTED IN REDEMPTION AND  
PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION*

(New York) -- Today, as part of National Second Chance Month, faith leaders, formerly incarcerated advocates and people with loved ones in prison from the People’s Campaign for Parole Justice, and lawmakers from across New York State held a virtual press conference as part of their “Parole Justice for Faith and Redemption” Advocacy Day to call for parole reform. Speakers made the faith-based arguments for rooting prison release determinations in redemption and personal transformation through passage of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills.

**Jose Saldana, Director of the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign/RAPP**, said, “Mass incarceration is the moral issue of today. Faith-based communities had a pivotal role during the Civil Rights movement. They have the same pivotal role in ending mass incarceration as the moral issue of our time. We in the faith community believe in redemption, transformation, and mercy as a fundamental tenet of our religion and practice. We believe that all people can be restored. That all people can change and be redeemed. That is what parole justice is about. That is what Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole are about. The truth is there is enormous political power wielded by us and our faith and our faith communities. Those of us in faith communities are organized, we act on our convictions, and we show for each other and what we believe in. That is power, and with that power, we can win transformative change to heal our communities and by extension heal ourselves. Together, inshallah, we can pass these bills and reunite our families.”

**Rev. Kimberly Quinn Johnson of the Universal Unitarian Church of the South Fork on Long Island** said, “Decades of harsh, racist sentencing have led to our current state of mass incarceration. Prison is an especially dangerous place for our elders during COVID-19. Whether it be COVID or age-related illnesses, no one should be condemned to die in prison. These bills have potential to return more of our elders to their families and communities where they belong. These bills give us an opportunity to approach this system with mercy and compassion, grounded in the idea that we are all capable and deserving of grace and redemption.”

**Cantor Eric Schulmiller of Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore in Manhasset** said, “We’ve reached a point as a society where we have to ask ourselves if we are no better than Joseph’s brothers, who cast him into a pit of darkness with no chance of redemption because of the sins of his youth. We try to embody God by being here today in solidarity with those who cry out for release. After years in a narrow and restricted place, the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely parole bills will give incarcerated New Yorkers hope and a chance at redemption. Jewish tradition teaches that forgiveness and redemption are a birthright of every human being. I hope our state legislators will listen to us today and grant incarcerated New Yorkers a fair and meaningful opportunity to demonstrate their teshuva, their rehabilitation, and be released.”

“I am here today in hope that my voice will reach those with the power of the pen to make these bills law. These bills would bring my loved one home to his daughter. He's missing milestones in her life and she needs her father in her life. He's not the whole sum of the mistake he made as a juvenile. It's a death sentence by incarceration and everyone needs and everyone should have a second chance,” said **RAPP leader Janette Colon**.

**Emmanuella Pierre, a RAPP Leader**, said: “My husband has been incarcerated for 17 years on a 25 to life sentence. He has accomplished so much. Above all, his favorite accomplishment is being a husband and a father. With visiting being closed, you can't see if your loved one is ok. I haven't hugged my husband in a year. Families miss those little things. I just hope and pray that these bills are passed to bring our people home so that no one dies in prison. There are birthdays, anniversaries, and life to live after prison. And everyone deserves that.”

**Pastor Kevin Middleton of ACTS Church in Mt. Vernon** said, “We as people are not snapshots but videos. If you were catch a snapshot of us at our worst moments, you run the risk of devaluing our entire story and how our entire lives are trophies of redemption. Everyone deserves second chances. I am happy to stand behind the Elder Parole bill and the Fair & Timely Parole bill. These policies mean second chances. These policies mean redemption. These policies mean life and life more abundantly.”

“A system based on punishment has devastated minority communities, particularly Black and Brown. It is our moral imperative to remind those in power that they are not locking up numbers, they are locking up people connected to communities and families. As Christians reflect on the resurrection of Jesus this Easter, it's a good reminder that there is life after death. Let's give people a chance at life again. It's what our families need and what our faith demands,” said **Pastor Shaun J. Lee of Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church in Brooklyn**.

"As people of faith, we cannot choose to ignore how the current criminal justice system in NY continues to deny second chances and promotes perpetual punishment. More than a thousand New Yorkers are not even eligible for any release at all meaning they will die in custody Today, it is our divine duty to advocate for a parole process that is rooted in redemption and for a system where people 55 and older have an opportunity for consideration for parole release. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes,” said **Reverend Kevin VanHook of Riverside Church**.

**Lead Assembly sponsor Carmen De La Rosa** said, “Dr. King said, 'the conscience asks, is it right? Not if it is safe or if it is popular or politic, but if it is right.' I will fight and we will fight until we have no more fight left in us.”

“The whole point of the correctional system is rehabilitation and not punishment. That’s why the name of my committee is the Corrections Committee, not the Punishment Committee. One of the things that can't be changed is the nature of the original crime. But so many people came into the system at a young age and we all know from our own lives that you are a different person as a youth. Medically, the brain is not yet fully developed. We learned that with the Raise the Age campaign. I think the environment is right to pass Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole. This is a new year, and 2021 is the year for major parole reform. Let's get it done in 2021,” said **Chair of Assembly Corrections Committee and lead Assembly sponsor of Fair & Timely Parole David Weprin**.

**Rabbi Marisa James of Beit Simchat Torah Synagogue, the largest LGBTQ synagogue**, said, “In Jewish tradition, Teshuva means returning, restoring, going back to yourself. Going back to the ideal piece of you that always exists and never goes anywhere. The holiest day of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, is entirely about evaluating what is the teshuva that I am doing. We are always causing big and small harm in the world. It is the human need to figure out what is the teshuva that we are doing. And the three pieces of teshuva is how do we return to our own souls, to our relationship with God, and most important to our own community and family. So when we put people in prison, and say you’re there now

for 25 years to life, we are denying people this inherent component of what it means to restore themselves. When we lock them away, that component of healing is taken away. It goes against the moral traditions of every religious tradition."

**NY Senator Brad Hoylman, lead sponsor of Elder Parole**, said: "You hear a lot from politicians who want second chances. Even in today's news, you have politicians acknowledging their wrongs, wanting a second chance from the public and urging compassion for their misdeeds. It's about time we redirect that compassion and that sympathy to the people who really need it. The people – the family members – who have been suffering for decades away from their loved ones. Innocent men, women and children, through no fault of their own, have been separated from their incarcerated loved ones. I love the concept of Tikkun Olam, where we repair the world, each and every one of us, through our actions. That's what we're trying to do today, to correct an unjust system where elder New Yorkers over 55 who have served 15 years have just a shot, a chance to plead their case before the parole board. I'm very eager and hopeful that we will pass the Fair & Timely Parole and Elder Parole bills, but there's a sense of urgency because every day, every week, and every month that passes, our communities lose people."

**BACKGROUND:** Redemption is a central tenet of many faiths. In contravention of this tenet, the current criminal justice system in New York State and beyond prioritizes vengeance and endless punishment. Tens of thousands of incarcerated New Yorkers – disproportionately Black and Latinx people – are denied fair consideration for parole release no matter how much they have repented, changed, and accomplished behind bars and more than a thousand are not eligible for any release consideration at all, meaning they will die in custody unless the brutal laws of mass incarceration are reformed. The People's Campaign for Parole Justice believes that all people can be redeemed and no one should be left behind. Our platform seeks to center parole release determinations on healing, good works, personal transformation, and community safety.

As just one example of a faith leader advocating against endless punishment, Pope Francis, a leading voice against the death penalty, has called life without parole sentences "hidden death sentences." He has also said, "Life imprisonment is not the solution to problems. I repeat: life imprisonment is not the solution to problems, but a problem to be solved...Because if hope is closed in a cell, there is no future for society. Never deprive one of the right to start over."

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](https://www.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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