

****PRESS RELEASE****

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ZOOM RECORDING [AVAILABLE HERE](#)

CURRENTLY INCARCERATED BLACK NEW YORKERS AND BLACK LEADERS FROM NY WORKING FAMILIES PARTY, HOUSES OF WORSHIP & COMMUNITIES ACROSS NY STATE JOIN LEGISLATORS IN BLACK 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 RACIAL JUSTICE' ADVOCACY DAY

(New York) -- Today, in recognition of Black History Month, Black community and faith leaders, including a currently incarcerated New Yorker, formerly incarcerated New Yorkers, and their families, joined NY State lawmakers in a virtual press conference to commence the Parole Justice is Racial Justice Advocacy Day and urge swift enactment of critical reforms. A recording of the entire press conference is [available here](#). The press conference and advocacy day were organized by 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.

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. Parole reform will help to ensure fair and meaningful opportunities for people in prison to demonstrate their personal transformation and be considered for release.

Stanley Bellamy, who is currently incarcerated at Green Haven Prison in the Hudson Valley, said: "For many African-Americans, Black History Month is a time for reflection. I ask Governor Cuomo and our legislative members to use this time to reflect on the racist policies of mass incarceration. History could report that you had the courage to make the hard decision to correct these policies that have harmed Black and Latinx New Yorkers. We are asking you for a second chance, a chance to become parents, grandparents, and mentors that young people desperately need. The racist policies of the past make our current conditions. You have the opportunity to change the conditions of tomorrow."

Sharon Cromwell, Deputy Director of the NY Working Families Party, said: "The Working Families Party urgently joins the call for the passage of the Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole bills. We know racism infects the parole release system, just as it does the entire criminal legal system. We need to take bold steps towards decarceration across New York now. We need to end the pandemic behind bars."

Once the pandemic ends, we cannot go back to business as usual. The whole parole system needs to be reformed now.”

TeAna Taylor, Policy and Communications Associate for the People’s Campaign for Parole Justice and resident of Schenectady, said: “My father has been incarcerated since I was 10 and now I am 26 years old. It’s been difficult navigating life without my father physically present. The passing of the Fair & Timely Parole bill will ensure that the parole board takes into consideration the huge transformations that I’ve seen my father go through. As a person who understands the gravity of the harm my father has caused, I know my father’s presence—the person he is today—would benefit my community, as he already is through me. He offers me tremendous support and pushes me to do better for myself and my community. And it’s not just my father. There is a whole community of transformed incarcerated people, and especially elders, who deserve to be free to live the rest of their lives building our communities and being with their families. Black people have historically been harmed by the racist criminal legal system in this state, and this country at large. The passage of these two bills will be a much needed and long overdue start of undoing some of the harm that has been done.”

NY Assembly Member Taylor Darling (Nassau County) said: “Incarceration does not just happen to the incarcerated. It is an experience that impacts entire families and communities. Understanding the enormous injustices built into the justice system, places so much more weight on the incarceration process and experience. This is why the parole process is so vital. Parole is an opportunity for individuals who have allowed time and reformation measures to render them a second chance at life beyond bars. Life with their families. Life with their communities. I am happy to commit all that I can to ensure that the parole process is as fair, just, and humane as possible. I want to thank the advocates and fighters for believing in this cause and never giving up. It means a lot.”

Reverend Kimberly Q. Johnson, Minister of the Universalist Unitarian Congregation of the South Fork (Suffolk County), said: “No one should be condemned to die in prison. These are our sister, mothers, and grandmothers. My faith proclaims that every single person has inherent worth and dignity. This legislation is a way to honor that worth and dignity. We are not the sum of our mistakes. Whatever your religion, as people of good conscience, we are morally called to act with compassion, recognizing that everyone is capable of redemption, and everyone is deserving of mercy.”

NY State Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa (Manhattan), lead sponsor of Elder Parole in the Assembly, said: “We know that we are not the sum of our worst mistakes, yet Black and brown people are made to feel as if they don’t have an opportunity to change--as though redemption is out of our grip. Today we join the People’s Campaign because we understand if we’re going to dismantle a system based on racism, we have to start on the streets to behind the prison walls. Their stories are the stories that should move our state towards change. We must pass Elder Parole. We must pass Fair & Timely Parole.”

Yusuf Abdul-Qadir, Racial Justice Strategist with the NY Civil Liberties Union, and a community leader in Syracuse, said: “We are in the second half of Black History Month, where we remember the contributions Black people have given to this country. We also remember the struggles we have had to endure since we were brought to this country as slaves. It is important for us to understand parole in the broader context of the white supremacist structures that continue to manifest themselves in the school-to-prison pipeline, and at the end of that pipeline is where we find ourselves today. We have an ecosystem that criminalizes and incarcerates Black and Brown people to funnel them upstate to be able to maintain prison industries. We are here today to say that if New York State is going to be a 'progressive' state then

it needs to stand on progressive values. This is not just a question of justice or racial equality, it is a question of the morality of the state of New York. In this global pandemic that disproportionately affects Black & Brown communities, New York has to do better. And what that looks like is passing the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills”

Dr. Robert Fullilove, Professor and Associate Dean at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, said: “We as a nation are number one in the world with respect to the impact the pandemic has had on people. The severity of this epidemic is in part a function of mass incarceration. Our failure to address this means that we are threatening the health of all of us. Our failure to see this is a blindness that history will judge us for. People who are incarcerated may not be present in our community, but from the perspective of the virus, these places, prisons, are launchpads. I’m appealing to everyone who is in a position to impact the course of this legislation to understand that the health of the public is at stake.”

Billy Davis, a leader with VOCAL-NY and Rochester resident, said: “Parole has been a revolving door, something to keep you in the system. I support these bills because the system is messed up. When I was in the system, the Parole Board denied me seven times, an extra 14 years for the nature of the crime. The nature of the crime will never change. How can they use these grounds to keep a person in prison?”

NY Senator Jabari Brisport (Brooklyn), said: “Black people are the ones who have been 'cancelled' by the criminal legal system and by mass incarceration. There's this pervasive notion that white people are worthy of redemption and Black and Brown people are irredeemable. As part of Black History month, I’m happy to support these bills. I want to build a criminal legal system that builds communities together and does not tear them apart.”

Vincent Southerland, Executive Director of NYU Law School’s Center for Race, Inequality, and the Law, said: “The struggle for parole justice and justice in the criminal legal system, is a struggle for racial justice. That is because, since America’s birth, the criminal system, race, and racism have been so intertwined as to be synonymous. In this country we have presumed that if you are Black or Brown, you are dangerous and unworthy of redemption. That racist presumption has remained with us at every turn--from enslavement to segregation to our era of mass incarceration. In New York, you're more likely to be released on parole if you're white than if you're Black or Latinx. New York's criminal system and parole system is consumed by the same presumption that Black and Brown people are irredeemable. It ignores the work that people have done over decades that shows they are worthy of release and more than the crimes they have done. That's not justice. I want to urge lawmakers to support the People's Campaign, pass these bills, and provide New Yorkers with meaningful opportunities for release.”

Assembly Member Zohran Mamdani (Queens), said: “I stand in full support of these pieces of legislation. They are just the bare minimum of what we’re asking for. Two weeks ago I went to Bedford Hills prison. Of the close to 500 women who are in Bedford Hills, I met two women, Martha and Cindy, who are in their sixties. Martha needs a cane to walk and Cindy needs a walker. Who does it serve to keep our elders in prison? Who does it serve to throw people in cages and throw away the key? This system does nothing to address harm, it only perpetuates harm. I’m so proud to be a member of this coalition. We desperately need to change the nature of justice in New York State and these are bills that will bring us forward in that goal.”

Assembly Member Khaleel Anderson (Queens), said: “Last week, I visited Green Haven Correctional Facility. The conditions that we saw were horrific. The stories that we heard were painful. Does the criminal justice system exist to correct or to punish? We have to keep fighting to make sure that we pass Elder Parole, Fair and Timely Parole, and to end this carceral system.”

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 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.

COVID-19 is worsening in NY State prisons. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 5,600 people incarcerated in prisons have tested positive for COVID-19 (over 1,000 in the past month). 32 incarcerated people have died of COVID. There are currently outbreaks of the virus at Bare Hill, Clinton, Franklin and several other 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/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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