

****PRESS RELEASE****

[Full Press Conference Zoom Recording Here](#)

(press conference begins at 6:50)

[Photos Available Here](#)

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**IN FINAL WEEK OF NY LEGISLATIVE SESSION, CRIME SURVIVORS
& VICTIMS' RIGHTS ADVOCATES JOIN NYS LAWMAKERS TO URGE
PASSAGE OF PAROLE JUSTICE MEASURES**

*PARTICIPANTS HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF PASSING THE FAIR &
TIMELY PAROLE AND ELDER PAROLE BILLS TO VICTIMS & SURVIVORS*

(Albany, NY) -- Today, at the start of the final week of New York State's legislative session, crime survivors and victims' rights advocates joined state lawmakers in a press conference to urge passage of parole justice measures. Participants highlighted the importance of passing the Fair & Timely Parole and Elder Parole bills to victims & survivors of crime and violence. The group also released [a letter signed by leading victim and survivor advocates](#) calling on Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins to pass the two bills this session. [See photos of the press conference here.](#)

Luz Marquez Benbow, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, co-founder of the National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault and a co-founder of Troy for Black Lives, said: "When I was a teenager, every system failed me as a victim. Not in my name will we stay silent as survivors as this state incarcerates my siblings who are also survivors. As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and rape, you can't end violence with prison violence. New York State lawmakers must pass the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills."

Chel Miller, Communications Director for the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said: "The majority of people who enter our prisons have experienced violence before their incarceration. Prisons are sites of sexual violence. We need to center survivors who are often marginalized, survivors in prison. In support of survivor justice, we need to free our loved ones. We need to pass Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole."

NY Senator Gustavo Rivera, lead sponsor of the Fair & Timely Parole bill, said: "I believe in redemption. We cannot have a system that is purely about punishment. Individuals change and the system must change. I will be working with my colleagues to pass these bills this session."

Chrys Ballerano, Senior Director of Collaboration and Training at the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said: "I'm a survivor of sexual violence. I've been working at NYSCASA for 22 years. There isn't enough done for prevention and healing. That's what we need. I hope that lawmakers will do the right thing and pass these fair parole bills, and reinvest the millions of dollars in savings in preventing violence and providing healing."

NY Senator John Liu, who co-sponsors the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills, said: “We have a parole system that is based on revenge and retribution. That has to stop. We are costing people their lives and their livelihoods. It’s time to give them a chance. I’m in full support of this package for parole justice and will do everything I can to get them passed this week.”

Assembly Member Chris Burdick, a co-sponsor of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bill, said: “We believe in redemption. We believe that people can turn around their lives. I’m supporting these bills having firsthand experience with correctional facilities. I have two prisons in my district. I see redemption firsthand. These are two common sense bills. Let’s get this done this session.”

Assembly Member Zohran Mamdani, a co-sponsor of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bill, said: “We are often told to either support survivors or incarcerated people. This is a false choice. We know that many people who have been harmed have also committed harm, and that most people harmed by violence support rehabilitation over permanent punishment. I believe that every New Yorker deserves what we demand for ourselves: a second chance. It’s up to us to give that to people. Justice cannot wait.”

Assembly Member Harvey Epstein, a co-sponsor of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bill, said: “Our message is clear. We have a system that focuses on harm and not transformation. This is a family issue, a fiscal issue, and a moral issue. How long do we need to wait for justice? This week is the moment.”

BACKGROUND: Survivors’ needs and beliefs about criminal justice are as varied and diverse as survivors themselves. In 2017, the [Downstate Coalition for Crime Victims](#), an interdisciplinary group of survivors and advocates in New York State, developed [a new vision for crime victims](#) based upon their own experiences and the needs and hopes shared with them by the people they served. They learned that many survivors want: safety for themselves and for their communities; racial justice and an end to the racial inequities which contribute to and exacerbate their traumas; interventions to stop cycles of violence, and to ensure that the people who harmed them will not cause harm in the future; accountability from people who perpetrate harm; and recognition from their communities that what happened to them was wrong. In its present form, the criminal justice system does not meet many of these needs.

New York State’s criminal justice system often exacerbates the harm done to victims and survivors, especially but not only those directly impacted by incarceration. Importantly, survivors and people impacted by mass incarceration are not two distinct groups. There are many survivors who have loved ones in prison, many survivors who have been criminalized for acts they have committed in the process of surviving violence, and many survivors who are incarcerated now, trying to heal from violence and abuse within the inhumane environment of our prisons.

Nearly [60%](#) of people incarcerated in women’s prisons, and as many as [94%](#) of some women’s prison populations, are survivors of violence, including sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and child abuse. Violence and abuse are also prevalent behind bars. In a [survey conducted in 2020](#) by the Correctional Association of New York at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, 74% of 110 respondents indicated that they had witnessed some form of violence or abuse by staff, including physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, while 53% of respondents reported

experiencing these acts of violence by staff themselves. Incarcerated survivors are too often sidelined and neglected in conversations about criminal justice reform and crime victims' rights. In April 2020, at age 61, [Darlene “Lulu” Benson-Saey](#), a survivor incarcerated at Bedford Hills, became the first woman to die of COVID-19 behind bars in New York. Elder Parole would have given Lulu a meaningful opportunity for parole release—and, most importantly, survival.

- There is a crisis of aging and dying for New Yorkers in prison and their families because of decades of extreme sentencing and blanket denials of parole release by a racially biased Parole Board. Without reforms to the Parole Board and parole release process in New York State, New Yorkers, especially those who are Black and brown, will continue to age without dignity, get sick, and die in prison regardless of their transformation and potential benefits to outside communities.
- 55% of the roughly 30,000 people currently incarcerated in New York State prisons are Black people, despite the fact that only 18% of the overall population in the state is Black. 77% are People of Color.
- According to a [Times Union analysis](#) of the nearly 19,000 parole board decisions over the last two years, racial bias infects parole release determinations and disparities have only widened in recent years. The data, which spans October 2018 through October 2020, shows the Parole Board granted parole release to 41% of white people, compared to 34% of Black people and 33% of Latinx people.
- Nearly 1-in-4 (24%) people in New York State prisons are serving life or virtual life sentences.
- 4,704 people in prison are defined by NYS DOCCS as older adults, meaning they are 55 or older.
- Without reforms to expand access to parole release and make the process more fair in New York State, New Yorkers, especially those who are Black and Latinx, will continue to age without dignity, get sick, and die in prison regardless of their transformation and potential benefits to the outside community.
- The People’s Campaign for Parole Justice is calling on lawmakers in Albany to pass two bills that, together, will ensure that people in prison have meaningful opportunities for individualized consideration for parole release based on who they are today, what they have done to change, and whether they pose a risk if released:
- [Elder Parole \(S.15A/A.3475A\)](#) would allow the State Board of Parole to conduct a case-by-case 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 \(S.1415A/A.4231A\)](#) would provide more meaningful parole reviews for incarcerated people who are already parole eligible, evaluating them based on who they are today and whether they pose a risk.
- The Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills are supported by more than 300 organizations across New York State, including some of the largest crime victims and survivor advocacy groups due to [the connections between parole justice and justice for victims and survivors of crime](#): The New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Crime Victims Treatment Center, The Working Families Party, 1199 SEIU, CWA District 1, VOCAL-NY, Citizen Action, New Hour for Women and Children—LI, LiveOn NY, JASA, the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, NY Communities for Change, Center for

Community Alternatives, Osborne Association, NYCLU, FWD.us, the #HALTsolitary Campaign, Legal Aid Society, Center for Justice at Columbia, and NYU Law's Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law.

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