

## **Hochul calls for reforms as she grants clemency to 10 people**

*Advocates 'heartbroken' by the lack of breadth of Hochul's actions*

### **Joshua Solomon**

ALBANY — Gov. Kathy Hochul granted clemency to 10 people on Friday as she also announced plans to reform the state's process for granting clemency, including improving the transparency of the process.

Hochul's actions on Christmas Eve included issuing nine pardons, all of which the governor's office said will help the people stay in the country without fears of deportation or other related issues. One person had his sentence commuted for a drug-related offense that had landed him in prison since 1992.

The news was not warmly embraced by criminal justice advocates, who had been calling for much broader action, particularly among a surge of COVID-19 cases in the state. The Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, which has pushed for policy action on the issues of incarceration, called Hochul's actions a "great disappointment" to not commute the sentence of more than one person.

"We are heartbroken knowing that so many of our mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers are suffering behind bars and facing a slow death penalty," the campaign's director, Jose Saldana, said in a statement. He pointed specifically to no women who are incarcerated being granted clemency.

The governor, heading into her first legislative session as the state's executive, offered her plans to alter New York's process in granting clemency to individuals.

The counsel to the governor is to now select an advisory panel to assist on clemency applications. The panel will include people from a variety of backgrounds, including members of law enforcement, the judiciary, clergy and formerly incarcerated people.

"Instead of talking about what she will do, we call on her to take real action now and moving forward by granting far more clemencies to incarcerated New Yorkers frequently, inclusively and transparently," Saldana said.

With additional resources, the governor's office expects the decision to grant clemency happening throughout the year and can "occur in a meaningful way, and that every application can receive the thorough and timely attention it deserves."

The state plans to release data on number of clemency applications delivered within the year and how many had been granted or denied, following each time

Hochul grants clemency. People with open clemency cases are to be notified twice a year that their application remains open.

Hochul also expects to work with the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision's clemency bureau to help the agency know what the governor's office is looking for in applications.

"I am committed to increased transparency and accountability in this process going forward," Hochul said in a statement. "No one should be defined by their worst mistake, and these individuals have worked tirelessly to atone for theirs."

Roger Cole, 55, had his sentence of 125-years-to-life in prison commuted by Hochul. He was sentenced during what the governor's office described as the "Rockefeller Drug Law era" at which point "extremely lengthy prisons were handed down for drug-related convictions."

"If he were sentenced today, he likely would not have faced such a lengthy sentence," the governor's office said about Cole in a statement.

The nine people who were granted pardons: Ana Sanchez Ventura, 64; Juan Vinas, 56; Faustino Reyes, 60; Sandra Williams, 65; Francisco Vargas, 53; Orlando Fernandez Taveras, 46; Hanley Gomez, 41; Juan Suazo, 54; and Edilberta Reyes Canales, 56.

They have been crime free, according to the governor's office, for at least seven years and up to 35 years. Several had been convicted for drug-related charges.

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*Times Union, December 24, 2021: <https://www.timesunion.com/state/article/Hochul-calls-for-clemency-reforms-grants-16727817.php>*