

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

**ZOOM RECORDING OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE HERE**

Contact: TeAna Taylor; [taylorteana@gmail.com](mailto:taylorteana@gmail.com); 518-847-5497

Jared Chausow, [jchausow@gmail.com](mailto:jchausow@gmail.com), 650 814 0565

**DURING NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMS RIGHTS WEEK, CRIME VICTIMS, SURVIVOR ADVOCATES, FORMERLY INCARCERATED ADVOCATES & LEGISLATORS FROM ACROSS NY STATE HOLD VIRTUAL PRESS CONFERENCE FOR PAROLE REFORM**

*PARTICIPANTS HIGHLIGHTED INTERSECTIONS OF PAROLE JUSTICE AND SURVIVOR JUSTICE.*

(New York) -- Today, as part of National Crime Victims Week, crime victims, survivor advocacy groups, criminal justice reform advocates, formerly incarcerated advocates with 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 & Survivor Justice: Expanding Pathways to Hope, Healing and Accountability* Advocacy Day to call for parole reform. Speakers made survivor-centered and trauma-informed arguments for expanding pathways to hope, healing, and accountability through passage of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills.

**New York State Senate Crime, Crime Victims & Corrections Committee Chair Julia Salazar (Brooklyn)** said: "Justice for survivors is inextricably linked to the need for parole justice in New York. The failures of the parole system in our state have perpetuated cycles of violence and harm. We must seek to implement policies that break these cycles, policies that are trauma-informed and evidence-based. It's urgent that we pass the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole legislation to reform parole for the sake of all New Yorkers who have been impacted by incarceration."

**Kathleen Pequeno, a restorative justice advocate whose brother was murdered in 1985,** said: "Before the murder of my brother, I would have said 'lock 'em up and throw away the key.' But now I see that attitude means throwing away money that we need for resources for survivors of serious and violent crime. I am one of the growing number of family members of murder victims who want systems that invest in real safety and support for our families, not just unending punishment. I hope the legislature passes the Elder Parole and the Fair and Timely Parole bills this session. These bills are about being realistic about assessments for safety, and making decisions about people based on who they are at present."

**Luz Marquez Benbow of #IamNegrx, an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse and an advocate for Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole,** said: "I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I'm tired of being used as a pawn to continue to dehumanize people, especially other survivors who are behind bars. Many of the people who are behind bars have stories similar to mine and often because of their race, gender expression, or how we deem them in society, they're never allowed to tell their stories. Because of the work of the People's Campaign for Parole Justice, over the last year, we've been able to bring together well-intentioned survivors

and incarcerated people to have real dialogue about ending childhood sexual abuse and ending sexual violence because we're not just relying on the bandaid solution of endless incarceration."

**State Senator Alessandra Biaggi (Bronx/Westchester), who co-sponsors both the Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole bills,** said: "This is an issue that is near and dear to my heart, to fight for survivors of sexual abuse across New York State. I am a childhood sexual abuse survivor. At every level of our government, we need trauma-informed policies. Our laws don't reflect the realities of peoples' trauma. We need to make sure that they center survivors and are oriented towards recovery and healing. I am proud to stand with all of you today as a co-sponsor of the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills. These bills will no doubt lead us in the right direction to end the cycles of trauma that incarcerated New Yorkers experience."

**Assembly Member Yuh-Line Niou (Manhattan), who co-sponsors both Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole and is a victim of childhood sexual assault,** said: "Our criminal justice system is really truly something that can be called a nightmare. It often delivers trauma instead of justice. It's negative effects don't just harm victims and survivors. That suffering extends to our family members and loved ones. We are creating a network of trauma, not a network of rehabilitation. Those scars impact our community members in ways that are seen and unseen. We need to end that. Our system of mass incarceration doesn't account for the traumas many incarcerated New Yorkers have faced, especially women."

**Assembly Member Niou** added, "Yesterday when we were debating a bill on the floor of the Assembly to ensure people on parole can vote, we had to hear some arguments Republicans put out there that people who are childhood sexual assault survivors would be angry about allowing people to vote. I was like, please don't speak for me. It was very harmful in the way that they spoke. They didn't think about who was listening, and who would be hurt by that."

**Anique Edwards, Youth Organizer with the S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective,** said: "Simply existing as a black woman, girl, femme and/or gender-nonconforming youth is a revolutionary act. It is the product of black love and testimony to black strength. It simultaneously, however, is a sign that we are not fully free. We do not have the right to live. The right to live uninterrupted from whiteness and its oppressive structures is not granted to us. We exist, and while our presence is strength, our presence is strength, because it has to be."

**Melissa Tanis, Center for Justice at Columbia University,** said: "Our binary legal system has led us to believe there are only victims/survivors and those who commit crimes, and there is never any connection or crossover. But the truth is that victims and survivors are capable of causing harm and people who have caused harm have often experienced harm or violence themselves. Our reliance on the law's definition of what constitutes harm or a 'crime' has narrowed our view of who is a survivor or victim, how and why harm occurs in our communities, and how our response to harm has failed so many survivors, including those who have been convicted of crimes. Dismantling white supremacy is the ongoing responsibility of white people, and the current legal system continues to prioritize white victims and disproportionately harm and punish Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. White women in particular have historically refused to acknowledge and make amends for our own participation in also harming these communities by relying on the police, advocating for harsh penalties and sentences, perpetuating media narratives that prioritize white victims' needs, and by failing to stand in solidarity with Black, Brown, and Indigenous people harmed by the state. As a white woman and survivor, I believe it is our duty to not only recognize that survivor movements

are often white-dominated, but to dismantle the systems that rarely bring true justice, reparations, and healing for Black, Brown, and Indigenous survivors who are often criminalized for their means of survival.”

**Chel Miller, Communications Director of the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault**, said: “The New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault believes that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve done. We also believe that we are all capable of meaningful accountability and profound transformation when our humanity is recognized and we have access to hope, resources, and community support. Endless punishment poses a systemic barrier to healing and accountability. It ignores the diversity of needs of survivors of violence and trauma, compounds the trauma suffered by incarcerated survivors, and takes necessary resources away from community safety. Instead, we want healing and care for all survivors, opportunities for meaningful accountability for people who have committed violence and harm, and investments in community-led initiatives to prevent and respond to violence. Parole reform which expands access to release will move us towards these goals. We urge state legislators to support substantial parole reform by depoliticizing and fully staffing the New York State Parole Board, and passing both Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole.”

**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 of 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.

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](http://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.

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.

###