

Parole commission comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Mark Brown, and I am here today to testify IN FAVOR OF JOINING ALL THE OTHER NEW ENGLAND STATES, BY BRINGING A FORMAL SYSTEM OF PAROLE back to the state of Maine.

I am the father of a son, who starting at the age of 21, spent 13 consecutive years inside Maine prisons. His name is Brandon Brown.

Brandon transformed his life and himself while he was incarcerated—he embraced education as his redeemer. He engaged in more transformative programs than I could even list. Our conversations over the years showed me his growth, but also showed his sense of despair, that others did not participate in these same opportunities. WHY? Why was this? The answer is simple. It's because there is literally no incentive to do so.

Brandon earned nothing more for his efforts while incarcerated than the men who chose not to engage in any of the opportunities offered. His accomplishments while incarcerated include an associate and bachelor's degrees with a 4.0 GPA. Brandon was also the very first incarcerated offender in the history of our state to complete and earn a Master's degree from George Mason University and also being accepted into their a PhD program. For his remarkable and historical accomplishments, he received no reduction of his sentence. He was also denied a commutation by our Governor, even though his victim supported the commutation. Take a moment and think about that... His victim supported his early release from prison, yet the Governor still denied the commutation. I still struggle to understand the logic behind that decision.

Brandon has recently taught multiple classes at both Colby College and the University of Maine. He also works at Long Creek Juvenile Facility for the Restorative Justice Institute of Maine, guiding young people through restorative processes to help keep them out of the system.

How much better would our society be if we had a system that actually created opportunities like the ones Brandon has seized? What would other men and women being released, be capable of, if they had the incentive to engage the way my son did? It's truly time to move on from the archaic and failing ways of constant punishment and confinement. We need to move towards a restorative justice, that practices the possibilities and realities of helping people change, improving lives and improving the communities we live in.

Recidivism is rarely discussed at length in the media or politically, and when it is mentioned, the statistics seem to always be ambiguous. I believe it is time to step up, to take responsibility for the continued failure of our prison system here in Maine and work diligently to fix it. Parole is not the only answer, but it is a necessary one.

We all know there are some very bad people in prisons. That is a fact. But believe me when I say, not everyone who goes to prison is bad. Most men and women sentenced to prison need a chance to believe in themselves, to find some community, and experience support, to achieve their potential and better selves.

We need a prison system that encourages and rewards growth. As a society we should require our prisons to incentivize change because it's in the best interest of our communities, and of public safety. We cannot, and you, as the gatekeepers of society and those responsible for passing laws that protect us, should not, accept a system that does not encourage and incentivize people who make mistakes. Give them a chance to transform their lives so they can reenter society as positive and hard-working members. We must, collectively believe in the power of transformation and redemption, but belief alone is not, and will never be enough. We need ACTION.

Please support this effort to bring parole back to our state. THANK YOU again for the opportunity to speak today.