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LD 178

I am writing in support of LD178, a bill to restore parole. I have a unique perspective, having been a social worker and having been incarcerated for almost 15 years. During my time in, I witnessed numerous inmates come and go repeatedly. They got "good time" perks each time - minimum status, furloughs, community status, home confinement, etc. They didn't actually have to demonstrate any particular change in their attitude or behavior, these things were simply given as a result of their short sentences.

While I was in, we did a survey of the female ultra long-timers, those with a sentence of 15 years or more. Of the 17 women with 15+ years, only 2 had ever been previously incarcerated. Two had done county time, but not for felonies. The other 15 had never had an encounter with law enforcement before, this was their one and only arrest. The common factor was they were all "high-profile", not by their choice. These women were being judged by a singular moment in time, when they were not at their best. The positive productive lives they led prior to their arrest counted for nothing, nor did the positive, productive lives they led inside while incarcerated. As a general rule, the ultra long timers are the ones advocating for all inmates, they are the leaders and set a positive example for others. They are the ones other inmates turn to for help navigating the system or learning about rights and responsibilities. They are not allowed the "good time" perks that other inmates have, as most of them are earning 5 days a month of good time. Their sentences are extreme because of the publicity and "public sentiment", not because of their character or repeated criminal history.

These are the inmates that I support getting a chance at parole. Not the repeat offenders who have a long history of criminal behavior, who seem to get shorter sentences and more perks - but the inmates who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or snapped under pressure, or did something completely out of character which they regret. Those inmates who have accepted their fate, and chosen to make positive productive choices while inside - despite not having any hope - are deserving of a second chance at life. I have been incarcerated with hundreds of women over the years I was in, and I met less than 30 whom I believe should have a shot at parole. Parole is designed to give people a second chance to prove that they have changed and evolved. Not everyone does, sadly, but those who do deserve a chance to prove it.

Ultra long timers need more opportunities to adjust and reacclimate as the entire world has changed significantly during their incarceration - they need to be exposed slowly and gradually to prevent them from being overwhelmed. Also, I would suggest that they need to participate in therapy to help them deal with the incredible emotions that come along with freedom after a long period of incarceration. I say these things based on personal experience. Despite preparation, I struggled to feel like I belonged. I felt like I had been plucked out of my world and placed in a foreign world where I didn't know the language or the customs, and didn't know how anything worked. I am grateful for my family who helped me navigate the world upon my release, and participated in therapy with me as we tried to figure out how to be a family again. But I also know that most ultra long timers do not have that luxury. To fully support them is critical - unless you have personally experienced it, it's hard to imagine the emotional rollercoaster that comes along with release. It can be very overwhelming without support, which is probably why the return rate is so high. I believe support and encouragement are pivotal in successfully reintegrating.

I support parole for those people who have demonstrated that they have changed and evolved during their incarceration, who have become leaders in their incarcerated communities, and who do not have a long history of criminal activity. They are the ones who are deserving of a second chance at life.

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