

Opinion: Views & commentary from around the community

Inside the Box: Parole Reform Now

By Matthew Hattley

In New York State, thousands of parole eligible men and women are denied their freedom every year, costing tax payers over \$160 million. Many of these individuals have the desire and potential to rebuild their disenfranchised communities — and strengthen the economy in the process — if given the opportunity. Unfortunately, not enough taxpayers are asking their elected officials the important question: What can be done to correct this? Well, here's a clue.

Parole reform is urgently need in New York State because it will save New York citizens millions of dollars and gives rehabilitated men and women an opportunity to reenter society to be productive, law-abiding members of their communities, and help others not to make the mistake of breaking the law.

Laws are instrumental to maintain order in civilized societies, and people who violate the laws must be punished for their offenses. However, being incarcerated can be extremely costly especially when one calculates the additional time men and women do over their statutory minimum sentences, which occurs more often than not.

It costs \$60,000 a year to keep a person incarcerated in New York State. Therefore, if John Doe, for instance, is sentenced to twenty years to life, at the minimum taxpayers will pay over \$1.2 million to keep John in prison for twenty years. On top of that though, tax payers will pay an additional \$120,000 to \$360,000 to keep John incarcerated because he had to do an extra two to six years over his statutory minimum of twenty years. This is solely due to parole commissioners denying him the opportunity to reenter society — usually for the nature of his crime.

The Parole Board is a quasi-independent body that evaluates individuals after they have completed their required statutory minimum sentence to determine if they are suitable for society. Often, commissioners will disregard the positive efforts incarcerated men and women take to rehabilitate themselves and deny them parole. Commissioners often determine that the crimes of men and women, crimes that were committed fifteen, twenty or twenty five years ago, when the individuals were much younger, and may even have been minors, are sufficient to deny them parole. These parole denials contribute significantly to the astronomical cost tax payers pay for the prison system. Those additional dollars could be used to build schools and hospitals, to maintain fire and police departments.

After spending fifteen, twenty or twenty five years in prison, many men and women have made tremendous changes in their thinking and thus their conduct. They have used the rehabilitative programs that the department provides for them. They are masons, welders, and plumbers, among other skilled professions. Others have gone above and beyond to educate themselves. They participate in privately funded college programs such as Bard and Nyack College. Many earn Associates, Bachelors and Master's degrees. Yet when evaluated by the parole board they are denied the opportunity to be productive citizens of their communities — pretty much entirely because of the nature of the crime they committed — for which they have served the sentence imposed by the Judge and the system of laws on which the state rests.

To allow parole commissioners to continue this form of injustice only serves two ends. First, it misappropriates tax payer dollars. Second, it undermines legislators' intent in enacting the Transition Accountability Plan (TAP), a rehabilitative program which must be considered by commissioners to help determine individuals suitability for parole. When released, we are not as dangerous as you are led to believe — not even close.

According to Jim Murphy of CURE-NY, "When individuals convicted of felony murder are released as some are, the statistics underline the weakness of asserting current danger. In the years between 1985 and 2009, 2,130 individuals sentenced for murder were released. Forty seven, or 2.2 percent, were returned to prison with a new conviction. None of the 47 was convicted for a new murder." Please help us reform the parole system by signing the Statewide Parole Reform Campaign's petition at www.parolereformnow.org Simply scroll down and click the word "here" (in red letters); this will grant you access to register. Our goal is 10,000 signatures before the November 2014 deadline. Every signature is important. Your support is greatly appreciated. Thank you.

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