

The Release of Aging People in Prison

RAPP Campaign

The Release of Aging People in Prison (RAPP) Campaign is an independent organizing and policy project that aims to establish a parole process in New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. that is transparent, all inclusive, and fair, in which the state bases its parole decisions on legitimate public safety risk and individuals' demonstrated personal growth while in prison. Led by Mujahid Farid, a 2013 *Soros Justice Fellow* who was incarcerated for 33 years in New York before his release in 2011, the RAPP Campaign focuses on the rapidly growing population of aging people in prison — many of whom are long-termers convicted of serious crimes. Many of these human beings have taken responsibility for their crimes, have transformed their lives, and developed skills and abilities they lacked before incarceration, and could be released from prison with no threat to public safety. Yet many are denied release, often for political reasons, and needlessly remain imprisoned into old age.

Our campaign will seek fair and objective hearings for all individuals who come before the Parole Board. Significantly, our approach will not seek expanded release opportunities for certain classes of offenses by denying opportunities for others. In contrast, we will insist that decisions be made on a person's individual merits and experiences inside. This operating principle not only makes the RAPP Campaign unique, but also allows it to challenge a fundamental pillar of the mass incarceration crisis: *the reliance on a system of permanent punishment, a culture of retribution and revenge rather than rehabilitation and healing.*

The RAPP Campaign is mobilizing currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and other concerned community members in efforts designed to increase parole release rates for aging people in prison who pose no risk to public safety. RAPP is also partnering with the Drop the Rock Coalition, which previously helped lead efforts to reform New York's infamous Rockefeller Drug Laws, and is reaching out to other prison justice groups to join in carrying out this work. From this united base, we will work to (1) raise public awareness about the destructiveness of mass incarceration and the benefits to society in releasing aging people, including those convicted of violent crimes who do not pose a risk to public safety and (2) promote the use of key mechanisms for releasing elderly people including parole decisions, compassionate release, and policy changes.

BACKGROUND

For 40 years the prison population in the United States has been increasing to where it has become an international embarrassment. While this has been acknowledged by federal and state governments, legislators, policymakers, and prison administrators (who face rising administrative costs amidst serious budget crises), and where incremental steps reduced some prison populations, there remains a strong reluctance to utilize available downsizing options as they apply to certain categories of people confined. The prison population will not be substantially reduced unless such options are used.

This project will seek to address mass incarceration through the “back end” of the criminal justice system, promoting the release of low-risk groups — especially aging people in prison, who make up a rapidly growing portion of the prison population. A recent Human Rights Watch report shows that between 1995 and 2010, the number of state and federal prisoners aged 55 and over nearly quadrupled to 124,400, while the prison population as a whole grew by 42%. The explanation for this can be found in sentencing policies adopted during the past 25 years (*Old Behind Bars: The Aging Prison Population in the United States*, 2012), but also in the failure of correctional and parole systems to utilize existing release mechanisms. Current conditions do not suggest improvement. The ACLU’s report, “At America’s Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly”, finds that by 2030 there will be more than 400,000 older people behind bars, a 4,400 percent increase from 1981 when only 8,853 state and federal prisoners were elderly.

New York State presents an even sharper example. Over the past 11 years, the New York State prison population has decreased by 21% — from 71,466 in 2000 to 56,315 in 2011. At the same time the population of prisoners aged 50 and over increased by 64% — from 5,111 in 2000 to 8,392 in 2011 (*Correctional Association* statistical sheet, “Elderly Prisoners and Parole Reform”).

Prison administrators know that older people who have served long sentences frequently serve as role models, facilitate most prison rehabilitation programs, and provide leadership, having found meaning in life through service to others. Moreover, the vast majority of released prisoners over 50 do not return to prison. Those who do return generally do so because of a technical parole violation (failure to report to a parole officer, missing work, or missing curfew). New York State policymakers are realizing that there

are alternatives to costly, unproductive incarceration when such violations occur (*2007 Releases: Three Year Post Release Follow-up*, NYSDOCCS). Consistently, the return rate of long-termers convicted of murder (most commonly people of advanced age) is the lowest (6.6%) system-wide, with only 1.3% returning for a new commitment.

Despite low recidivism rates, ample evidence of personal transformation and the significant cost savings that could be realized, political considerations too often prevent administrators from using available release mechanisms. The RAPP Campaign will utilize the voices of the key population of formerly incarcerated women and men, along with current elderly prisoners to show that they can and should be released with no threat to public safety. It will build a public base to encourage policy-makers, parole commissioners and correctional officials to accelerate release of the elderly through both new and existing mechanisms for release.

CONTACT INFORMATION

RAPP

Director Mujahid Farid

(212) 254-5700 ext. 317

nyrappcampaign@gmail.com

The Correctional Association of NY
2090 Adam Clayton Powell Blvd., 2nd Floor
New York, New York 10027
USA