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Linking faith communities across Wisconsin to work for Justice

WISDOM

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Parole and Compassionate Release briefing

Nearly 3,000 people in Wisconsin prisons are eligible for parole. All of them were convicted of crimes committed before “Truth in Sentencing” was enacted in 1999. Prior to “Truth in Sentencing”, many people were given extremely long sentences by Wisconsin judges who understood that they would likely be paroled after 25% of their overall sentence had been served if they completed their programs and were deemed rehabilitated.

In recent years, the percentage of eligible people granted parole has shrunk to about 5%, meaning the vast majority of what are called “old law” prisoners are serving much more time than the judges who originally sentenced them anticipated. More than 400 are so low-risk that they leave the prisons every day to work unsupervised in the community. All these prisoners have already served at least 17 years.

Old law prisoners cost taxpayers more than \$95 million per year. But even more important that the monetary cost is the cost in frustration and suffering not only on the part of the prisoners themselves, but also on the part of their families.

Many parole-eligible people are elderly and/or seriously ill. Those people should be identified and moved through the release process as quickly as possible. Extremely few cases have been approved in recent years, leading to enormous costs, while families are deprived of a chance to have their loved ones nearby in their final years.

Actions to be taken:

1. Immediately appoint a new Chair of the Parole Commission, who will change the philosophy and work to move toward release for those who have met the conditions and expectations of the sentencing judge.
2. Get an immediate outside assessment of all parole-eligible people in Wisconsin prisons, to determine which of them are low-risk and can be returned to the community.
3. Have the new DOC Secretary order every adult institution to identify all people who are potentially eligible for Compassionate Release, and to assist those people in applying for release.
4. Immediately reconstitute the Pardon Board, and ask them to identify especially those people who received unreasonably long sentences, especially as youths or young adults, for whom a commutation of sentence would be appropriate.

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