

**TESTIMONY BY SHOWING UP FOR RACIAL JUSTICE NYC  
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON CRIME VICTIMS, CRIME & CORRECTION HEARING ON HOW  
THE ELDER PAROLE AND FAIR & TIMELY PAROLE BILLS WILL IMPROVE  
PAROLE RELEASE LAWS AND PUBLIC SAFETY IN NEW YORK STATE**

Thank you to the New York State Senate Committee on Crime Victims, Crime, and Correction, and in particular Chair Julia Salazar, for the opportunity to present testimony today on the Elder Parole (S.15A-Hoylman) and Fair & Timely Parole (S.7514-Salazar) bills. Together, these two parole justice measures will reunite families, improve community safety, and save the state massive sums of money that could be reallocated toward urgent community needs. As a volunteer organizer with Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) NYC, I submit this testimony in support of both bills and respectfully urge the Legislature to finally call a vote on them.

Through community organizing, mobilizing, and education, SURJ moves white people to act as part of a multi-racial majority for justice with passion and accountability. We work to connect people in NYC to local racial justice organizing efforts. SURJ NYC provides a space to build relationships, skills, and political analysis to act for change.

SURJ NYC has organized and mobilized white New Yorkers in support of the Fair and Timely Parole and Elderly Parole bills for several years now. We recognize that it is frequently white people's fear and desire for a sense of safety that is cited to justify the use of the criminal punishment system to put Black people and other people of color in prison, and to keep them there indefinitely, regardless of how they have changed over time. We know that our criminal punishment system was born out of racism and the desire to exert control over Black people after the end of slavery, and we refuse to participate in upholding a racist system. We know that we create safety not by locking up "dangerous" people, but by ensuring that everyone has their basic needs met: access to food, housing, healthcare, and education.

We advocate for the Fair and Timely Parole and Elder Parole bills because we know that their implementation will fundamentally change this aspect of our criminal punishment system and

bring home people who deserve to be with their families. Fair and Timely Parole simply ensures that parole hearings function the way most New Yorkers assume parole hearings should operate - as an assessment of who a person is today, not solely the offense they were locked up for years ago. It requires that the Parole Board proves that the person who sits before them today should not return to their community because they are currently a danger, not because they once did something deemed criminal. This is the way the Parole Board should have functioned from the beginning, rather than assigning themselves the role of judge and jury, re-litigating a trial that concluded many years, if not decades ago. Once someone has completed their minimum sentence, the assumption should be that they go home, not that they continue their sentence indefinitely and most likely die in prison.

It is also widely acknowledged that in recent decades New York's sentencing was highly punitive, beyond what most New Yorkers today would believe to be appropriate, even if they believe that prison is a necessary tool to punish and reform people convicted of crimes. We also know that these draconian sentencing practices have disproportionately affected Black folks and other people of color, who are not only more likely to be arrested and convicted of a crime but are also more likely to be given a longer sentence. The Elder Parole bill offers New Yorkers today the chance to correct the mistakes of the past, a chance we don't often get. By giving incarcerated elders the chance for a parole hearing, we have the opportunity to acknowledge that these highly punitive sentences were wrong, and correct them before it is too late. Not only do our incarcerated elders deserve the chance to be with their loved ones, they also have so much to offer their communities after decades spent getting degrees, creating programming, mentoring younger folks, and doing so much with so few resources. While organizing with the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign (RAPP), we have been lucky to meet and spend time with countless people who were finally released after many previously unsuccessful interviews with the parole board. We know that they could have done so much with the years they continued to be locked up after being denied release again and again. We also know that there are many others who we could have learned so much from if they were only given the chance to return to their families and communities.

In addition to these bills being the right thing to do and a small step toward curbing the harmful effects of this racist system, it also benefits the state's bottom line. Keeping people incarcerated and away from their families is expensive, especially as people age and require further medical attention. We do not believe that this is a primary reason to adopt these bills into law, but we recognize that it is a persuasive point. Every dollar New York spends incarcerating thousands of elders year after year, ostensibly in the name of public safety, is a dollar that could be spent on housing, education, healthcare, and other social resources that actually make New Yorkers safer.

As white people who stand for racial justice, we reject any attempt to attribute the current function of the parole system as in the best interest of safety, when there is overwhelming evidence that racism has caused worse outcomes for Black and Latinx people at every point in the criminal punishment system, from arrest to bail to trial to sentencing to parole and beyond. We call on the Senate to pass these two bills and take a step toward correcting the many racist decisions that have created the system as we know it. We believe in redemption and second chances, for individuals and for our collective governance. Please, do the right thing and make 2023 the historic year in which we take a step toward justice as a state.

Thank you for considering our comments.