

Members of the Committee, Chairman Piccola,

My name is Sandra Lutz and I am the Coordinator of the Adams County Victim/Witness Assistance Program.

When I received an invitation to participate in this hearing, I was not exactly sure of what I wanted to say. I have spent the last several days thinking about this legislation and the issues that come to my mind.

I am a Victim Advocate but I submit to you that what we are discussing today is far more than a victim issue.

In the wake of recent findings regarding the practices of our Board of Probation and Parole, I am concerned that this legislation may have been proposed in an effort to place a band-aid on the tragedies suffered at the hands of the paroled inmates who have committed murders in past months.

This hearing is our opportunity to examine that possibility and to look at other issues surrounding this legislation.

I am not convinced that changes in the administration of the Board of Probation and Parole alone are what we need.

In order to consider this legislation, we must be willing to commit ourselves to making changes in the corrections system that will make us all more at ease about releasing any violent offender. We must also accept that, to make this system work, we need a cooperative effort from all the departments who play a significant role in this important decision-making process.

As a Victim Advocate, I am committed to doing whatever I can to meet the needs of my clients. Each case is different and each presents new problems and questions. I have learned to enlist the help of others who directly affect the service that I provide and I cannot work effectively without continuous communication and cooperation from victims, law enforcement, district attorneys, judges, probation officers and corrections staff. Interestingly enough, these are the very same people that the Board of Probation and Parole need to be utilizing to reach a well-informed parole decision. Although these agencies are readily accessible to me in my work, what do they have to offer to our Board of Probation and Parole?

In the absence of intensive rehabilitative programs for offenders, we are doing nothing more than teaching inmates to survive in a prison environment--an environment that falls somewhat short when you consider the skills that are required to function in a society. Under these conditions, our prisons really have no basis to evaluate anything more than the good or bad conduct of an inmate and, therefore, can be of very little assistance to the Board in making release decisions.

In order to further define the need to consider this reform legislation, we must also examine the role that our judicial system is playing in this process.

I agree with Representative Piccola's initiative to consider the input of the sentencing courts and district attorneys each time an inmate is considered for parole. But, in the interest of being fair to the Board, during the five years that I have been a victim advocate, I am not aware of any cases where our judges or district attorneys have exercised their rights to input.

It has also been my experience that our sentencing court has been rather inconsistent about insuring that copies of pre-sentence investigations make it to the correction facility and become a part of an inmate's file. These reports alone provide an excellent tool to evaluate the history of violence, prior record and a defendant's social behavior--all important variables in consideration of parole.

Although these gaps in our system are not the fault or responsibility of the Board of Probation and Parole, they certainly affect their ability to make well-informed decisions when considering the release of an inmate.

Do we need reform legislation to resolve these issues; and, if so, is it only the Board of Probation and Parole we need to address?

Should we move to add a Commissioner to oversee this Department or can we utilize the work force that we have and demand a level of commitment that would assure that decisions regarding the release of an inmate will be handled efficiently and responsibly.

I cannot speak in regard to the alleged mismanagement of this Department as I am not familiar with its entire structure or chain of command, but I would be interested to know why we have not experienced or heard of similar problems in the past several years while under the same system of management.

It is difficult for all of us to answer to the public when our system fails and I feel great sympathy for the victims and their families, who may have become the focus of this legislation, but we have an obligation to our public to define all of the issues. We need legislation that does not point the finger but dictates a unified effort to manage this system.

It is my understanding that Governor Ridge has ordered an investigation of the Board of Probation and Parole. I feel it is important to await the findings of this investigation before acting legislatively. We need to look at all of the facts before taking action. We may find that new legislation is not the answer. We may find that we already possess the resources necessary to put things back on track.

In closing, I would urge this Committee to continue to give this legislation the careful consideration it requires. We cannot afford to make the same mistakes twice nor can we afford to lose another life in our state or anyone else's. We owe it to our public to propose legislation that is truly in the best interest of all parties involved.