

WRITTEN REMARKS OF
DIANNA L. HOLLIS
September 19, 2000
House Subcommittee on Courts Hearing
Hershey, Pennsylvania

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, and Legislators, thank you for permitting me to submit my thoughts about parole for lifers in Pennsylvania.

I am a Certified Psychiatric Nurse, employed by this Commonwealth. I have been involved with prison issues for the past 20 years. I am a member of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, and Graterfriends. I have served as President of Pennsylvania CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants), a family and inmate advocacy organization, since 1998.

I come here today to not only give support for my husband Douglas, a life-sentenced inmate, but the other 3700 life-sentenced men and women, and their families, in this Commonwealth.

I realize, respect, and understand, and share the concerns of this body, and society. However, I believe life sentences lack fundamental fairness.

My husband has been a model prisoner, respected by fellow inmates and staff. Despite all Douglas' skills and achievements, he has been denied freedom, through the Commutation process. Other lifers ask Douglas, what chance do they have, as even Douglas, with his excellent record, fails to be commuted?

The framers of the Constitution wanted a system of Mercy and Compassion, called Commutation. In the past few years, that process is closed to lifers, Our Governor and Lt. Governor are on record that in Pennsylvania, "life is life".

Douglas was recommended by the Board of Pardons, 4-1, to have his life-sentence commuted by Governor Robert Casey. Unfortunately, the infamous Reginald MacFadden was commuted, and Douglas denied - reason unknown. The next time Douglas applied for commutation, the vote was 1-4, against. The only thing that was different since last time, was Reginald MacFadden.

We know the changes that have come about because of Mr. MacFadden's failures - like the 5-0 Unanimous vote of the Board of Pardons, needed by the lifer to be recommended to the Governor, to have his life sentence, commuted. The unanimous vote cannot guarantee that a lifer will not regress. No one can predict what a man might do, It does not mean, either, that the Governor will commute

the applicant, even though recommended. What we need to do again, is learn to trust, and take the risk to utilize the process. Unfortunately, it remains a political process.

Now, lifers, deserving a second chance, are being denied - because of the actions of someone else. I ask, how would you like to have all your honest efforts denied, based on the behavior of someone else? I believe each lifer should be judged on his own record, and looked at as an individual. The reality that my husband was just one signature away from freedom, haunts me. Now, freedom is only a dream!

Not every lifer is a Reginald MacFadden. Many, like my husband, were 16 year old, ignorant, children, from dysfunctional families, lacking the parental guidance needed at that time of their lives. They were living in the streets, involved in gangs, caught up in the fast life. Only when Douglas came to prison, did he realize he did not like the person he had become, and made a commitment to change, to the educated, mature man he is today.

Douglas lives daily with the reality of his crime. He is very remorseful, and very embarrassed by his crime. He prays daily that the Lord will forgive him, for an act he did out of ignorance, as a young child.

We need not forget the victims, but there must be a time when there is healing and forgiveness. To hold the anger inside, we become bitter.

I do believe that everyone is redeemable. Yes, the lifer has made a tragic mistake. Unfortunately, that's the way of the world. However, no matter how long a lifer serves, he cannot bring back the life he has taken.

Most lifers couldn't afford to hire good attorneys to represent them, and got harsher sentences than perhaps others would have. There are women ,serving life, for defending themselves against abusive husbands.

There are inmates, serving life who did not actually do the crime, but were at the scene. There are some who were part of a felony.

Every prison administrator will tell you that lifers are the stabilizing force in the institution. I ask, how much longer will they remain the stabilizer, when there are no incentives, or HOPE, to obtain freedom?

Pennsylvania has the largest lifer population in the world. The National Report for Criminal Justice revealed that African-Americans receive far greater sentences than whites. It's apparent that Racism plays a large part in why the

majority of lifers in Pennsylvania, are black.

Not every lifer should be released, but there are lifers I personally know who could be successful, and make positive contributions to society - like the commuted lifers, Steven Blackburn, Anthony Jacobs. There are other lifers who also deserve a second chance to get their lives back.

The present system just is not working! Lifers feel hopeless, as the Commutation process is only a word. It has become a "re-trial", rather than what it was meant to be, as the late former Secretary of the Board of Pardons, John Lord, said - it's to be a Board of "Mercy and Compassion". At present, life in Pennsylvania is also a death sentence!

We can't keep warehousing and building more prisons, costing citizens more and more tax dollars each year. Why not let the families take on the burden of the supporting the lifer, especially as he ages? We are building good geriatric prisons, however, that, also, costs the taxpayer more money. It costs \$25,500 - \$60,000 per year to keep an inmate 50+ years old, with medical problems. The lack of compassion has increased the tax burden by cramming the prisons full to the bursting point.

Pennsylvania , South Dakota, and Louisiana, are the only 3 states where lifers are ineligible for parole.

The present system is not working! If the system was fair, there would be no need for parole for lifers. I would not be pleading with you to grant lifers parole options, but the truth is , it is not. Granting parole options does not mean that they will be granted parole, nor does it strip the Governor of his executive powers to pardon. It merely sets a time-frame when a lifer can be considered for parole. This would also allow distinction to be made between first and second degree murder. Many times, the Judge states that first degree murder is life without parole. The reality is, that second degree murder ia also life without parole.

We need a thorough re-evaluation of this process. I ask you to consider the options, like parole eligibility, to give the DESERVING lifers a fair chance to start anew.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,
Dianna L. Hollis
Dianna L. Hollis, President
PA CURE

How did CURE begin?

PA-CURE is a chapter of National-CURE, which was founded in San Antonio, Texas in 1972. CURE is dedicated to reducing crime through the reform of criminal justice and penal systems. PA-CURE began in 1985.

What are CURE's goals?

CURE's goals are to make sure:

- Prisons are used only for those who absolutely must be incarcerated.
- Prisoners have all the resources they need to turn around their lives.

What are CURE's activities?

CURE's daily activities include:

- Providing prisoners and their families with information about rehabilitative programs
- Promoting the creation of more rehabilitative programs
- Convincing prisoners changes can be brought about more effectively through the exercise of their constitutional rights.

LOIS A. WILLIAMSON

Survive Sunset
May 27, 1930 June 10, 1998

PA-CURE Director Lois Williamson from 1985 to 1998, also a former National-CURE chairperson, devoted years of service to prisoners and their families. She called prisons "dehumanizing and often brutal environments, warehouses where men and women adjust to a perverted social order, totally antithetical to normal society." She believed families of prisoners must "provide the backbone for CURE's efforts to make the criminal justice system responsive to the human needs of prisoners." PA-CURE is committed to continuing and expanding Lois' tireless efforts.

PA-CURE

P.O. Box 125

Millersburg, Pennsylvania 17061

PA CURE BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

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PA-CURE

Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants

A Chapter of National CURE

A Forum for
Pennsylvania Criminal Justice
Advocates and Support Agencies,
including Victims, that provides
Solutions to Crime, through
Citizen Advocacy, in the
Pennsylvania Criminal Justice
and Prison Systems

PA-CURE

PA-CURE is a forum for Pennsylvania criminal justice advocacy and support organizations and individuals who believe in the value of, and the need for:

- Humane incarceration
- Pro-Family policies including parenting programs and improved visiting experiences for children
- Protection of prisoners' civil rights and their health and safety
- Social, educational and treatment programs for prisoners
- Targeting crime prevention as the most reasonable approach to the reduction of crime and violence
- Restorative programs to assist prisoners in becoming responsible citizens
- Community re-integration programs
- A DOC Citizens Advisory Committee at each prison
- Legislative changes that include:
 - + Parole reform
 - + Returning judicial discretion to judges
 - + Alternative Sentences for non-violent convictions
 - + Elimination of super-max housing
 - + Greater opportunities for the use of commutation
 - + Quality legal representation for all accused and convicted
 - + Restructuring of mandatory minimum legislation
 - + Restoration of voting rights to eliminate minority disenfranchisement
 - + Changes in prison phone systems to encourage family interaction

MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Membership in PA-CURE is tax-deductible and includes:

- Membership in PA-CURE
- Membership in National-CURE
- PA-CURE newsletter
- Quarterly National-CURE newsletter

Send application to:

Dianna Hollis, President, PA CURE
P.O. Box 125

Millersburg, Pennsylvania 17061

Phone- (717) 692-2180

Fax- (717) 692-5603

E-Mail - dlhdh@epix-net pa.net

JOIN OR RENEW TODAY!

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Life/organization | \$100.00 |

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(include Area Code)

I can serve on the following committee:

- Abuse/Medical Care Problems
- Family Relationships/Visits
- Humane Incarceration
- Legislative Reform/Lobbying
- Public Education/Publicity
- Fundraising
- Membership
- Rallies
- Mailing
- Phones

Is CURE soft on crime?

NO. CURE supports its issues with sound reasoning and statistics. These common sense arguments show overwhelmingly CURE's issues will reduce crime. Also, these anti-crime issues will save money for the taxpayer. CURE has been involved in the creation of programs to compensate victims, and will continue to work for the rights of crime victims.

Crime victims should have assurances that while their offenders serve time these offenders are being treated in ways that promote greater safety upon release; that systems are in place to provide the offender with opportunities to earn a fair wage while serving time so that s/he is able to pay fines, restitution to the victim/victim's family.

PA-CURE is among those seeking positive changes in the criminal justice system - changes that provide safer communities and reduce prison costs.

What has National CURE done?

Aided in passing national legislation that:

- allows states to make pregnant women eligible for WIC (Women, Infants and Children), a federal program providing nutritional food assistance
- asks states receiving federal funds for juvenile justice to file an annual report on the number of juveniles who died while in custody and the circumstances of the death
- keeps funding in federal prison budget for inmate parent/child programs (MATCH model)
- renews the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit, and keeps ex-inmates in TJTC
- authorizes and funds projects for treatment and prevention of sex offenses
- increases education programs in prisons and jails