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Beyond the 'possibility' of parole

by Carol Howes • April 1, 2014 • 1 min read • [original](#)

During my more than three decades of service with the Michigan Department of Corrections, I watched as hundreds of prisoners who had committed very serious offenses in their youth matured into thoughtful and responsible people. Most were very remorseful, took responsibility for their crimes, completed every possible program and worked hard to prove they would be ready to become productive members of society once they completed their lengthy sentences. They often served as mentors and tutors to other prisoners and struggled to maintain family ties as the years passed.

Many of these prisoners had been sentenced to “life with the possibility of parole.” Both my experience and the research show that parolable lifers are extremely unlikely to return to prison for another similar crime. However, many of them are being kept behind bars for years or decades longer than their sentencing judges intended.

When I began my career, prisoners sentenced to life or a term of years were not treated very differently. The parole board focused on prisoners' readiness for release, not the type of sentence. However, a series of changes by the Legislature beginning in the early 1990s dramatically changed the parole review process for parolable lifers.

The law now allows the board to deny paroles for five years at a time without even interviewing parolable lifers in person, assessing their re-offense risk, or providing reasons. There is no longer any judicial review to ensure the board's decisions are consistent or objective. When the board does show interest in paroling someone, the successor to the original sentencing judge, with no current knowledge of the individual, can unilaterally stop the process without giving any reasons. As a result, the population of aging parolable lifers has swelled, taking up expensive prison bed space.

About 850 parolable lifers have already served years or decades past their first parole eligibility date (not including people serving time for drug offenses).

Every five-year parole denial costs taxpayers another \$200,000. Two recent reports by the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending (CAPPS) show that Michigan could save at least \$17 million by returning to the parole policies and procedures that served the state well in the past.

That's why I signed a statement calling for reforms to the parole review process for lifers, along with 26 other former MDOC officials, including three former MDOC directors and two former parole board chairs.

Michigan should not keep parolable lifers who have served their sentences behind bars unless they are objectively shown to pose a current risk to public safety. Throwing away the key for aging and ill prisoners crowds our prisons and costs taxpayers millions. I would far rather see that money reinvested in services that will better prepare prisoners to become productive, tax-paying citizens.

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