

February 3, 2021

Testimony in support of Maryland Senate Bill 202

I urge you to support SB 202, a bill that would take the governor out of the parole process in Maryland. As professor of philosophy at Georgetown University, I have taught at Jessup Correctional Institution and at the DC Jail since 2016. At both places I have taught and tutored lifers who have already served more than 15 or 20 years behind bars. Some of them have become friends, whom I trust as much as anyone I know.

As you know, Maryland is one of only three states in the country to require the governor's approval to release anyone serving a life-with-parole sentence. This policy inevitably politicizes the parole process. Shockingly, only three lifers have been granted parole in 25 years—even when the Maryland Parole Commission approved their release, which it rarely does.

Currently, more than 2,000 people are serving life-with-parole sentences in Maryland. Of those, 300 committed their offenses as juveniles, and 400 are now 60 years old or older. Many of these people, including many students I have taught at Jessup and the DC Jail, have undergone great transformations and have shown that they can lead good and productive lives outside the walls. Research shows that lifers released on parole have a very low recidivism rate; in Maryland, the successful release of 250 lifers under the *Unger* decision powerfully supports that claim.

More than 10 percent of those in Maryland prisons are serving life-with-parole sentences, costing taxpayers more than \$70 million a year. Moreover, the extreme racial disparities in Maryland's prisons means that the governor's role disproportionately affects Black prisoners and their families.

Under the new legislation, instead of vetoing every parole, governors would select capable commissioners for the Maryland Parole Commission who would make evidence-based recommendations. Before someone can even be considered for parole, they must serve 15 to 25 years (depending on the sentence). They are then subject to a rigorous review process, including reviews of all their records, in-person interviews, a risk assessment, and majority approval by the commission. Victims are notified of every parole hearing, and the commission gives great weight to their statements. None of this would change under the new law.

Requiring the governor to approve all paroles for lifers is deeply problematic for several reasons. It politicizes the parole process. It does an injustice to prisoners who have turned their lives around. It wastes precious human resources. It costs Maryland taxpayers money. And it further entrenches the grave racial disparities in our criminal justice system. It's time to end this practice.

Sincerely,

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