

Bill Number: SB202

Title: Correctional Services - Parole - Life Imprisonment

Committee: Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

Date: February 4, 2021

Support for SB202, Lifers Bill – Petition to Remove the Governor from the Parole Process

Dear Honorable Members of the Legislative Committee:

My name is Kymberly Nelson. I reside in Prince George's County, Maryland. I am the Aunt of an Inmate who is currently incarcerated at the Jessup Correctional Institution.

I am in support of the Lifers Bill – SB 202 to remove the Governor from the parole process. My nephew was second to the oldest of seven children. At the young tender age of six, he took the leadership role in his home. He had two younger siblings, a younger brother who was four and his younger sister was two. They were all being neglected by their parents due to drug abuse that the rest of the family was oblivious to. One morning I noticed my nephew walking to his bus stop by himself. That troubled me. So the next day, I went to walk him to the bus stop. When I arrived at the house, his parents were asleep. My nephew opened the door and let me in. He had on a dirty school uniform and went in the kitchen to warm up some rice for himself and his siblings which were 4 and 2 at the time.

Soon after, my nephew and his siblings moved into our household. Even after he moved in with us, he was still trying his hardest to be the parental figure for his siblings. They were all severely traumatized. He would wet the bed. He became somewhat withdrawn. He had abandonment issues and communicated to me all the terrible things that he witnessed while he was with his parents. Even though his home life wasn't easy for him. School was. He was very intelligent. His teachers and guidance counselor were particularly fond of him. They often bragged about how smart he was and how helpful he was. Some years later, his mom rehabilitated herself. She got a job, an apartment and she regained custody of her kids. She didn't live in the best neighborhood and became heavily Influenced by his environment. With a lack of positive role models accompanied with low self-esteem, he started to use marijuana and PCP to cope with the emptiness he felt. He started using drugs around 13-14 to my knowledge. With the drug use he lacked good judgement and critical thinking skills.

He committed a tragic crime and was arrested at sixteen years old and sentenced at seventeen to Life in Prison all suspended except thirty-five years. To date he has been incarcerated longer than he was alive at the time he was arrested. Since his incarceration, he has received his GED, successfully completed an Auto Mechanic Program. He hasn't been in any trouble. He has a constant desire to learn. He reads all kinds of books. We discuss the books that he and I have read. He talks about wanting to become an Entrepreneur when he is released and starting a nonprofit to help the youth.

This is why I am in support of the SB 202. If you commit a crime you have to be punished but the amount of time one is punished, should be fair and just. There are things that I have done as a juvenile that I wouldn't dare do today as an adult. Even though Juveniles commit crimes and the courts charge them as adults, the fact is, they are not adults. You have to give juveniles the opportunity to mature, reform, rehabilitate and redeem themselves as a productive Adult. Sixteen years is a short life. When you think of yourself at Sixteen, and all the mistakes that you have made, you look back and say I was just a kid. Juvenile lifers don't get that same respect. They were kids who committed a crime and served adult time.

People serving life sentences don't generally elicit much public sympathy. They were generally convicted of heinous crimes, usually first-degree murder. But the fact of the matter is that those who were sentenced to life with the possibility of parole had the understanding — as did the lawyers who counseled them, the prosecutors who convicted them and the judges who sentenced them — that they would one day have the opportunity for release if they had served substantial amounts of time and no longer presented a danger to the community. More than 2,500 people serving life sentences in Maryland are now eligible for parole, and because of the decades-long reluctance of Maryland governors to allow their release, they are an increasingly elderly group. Maryland's parole commission made such recommendations scores of times, but none were approved for a period of more than 20 years, by any Governor. If the recommendations from the Parole Board are ignored by the Governor, what is the Parole Board there for? Aren't they more qualified than the governor to make such recommendations? I believe so. These Institutions are overcrowded and releasing those who have served 15-20 years, taken advantage of the programs and demonstrated good behavior should receive parole.

In conclusion, this bill is very important to the families of Juvenile Lifers. We would love to be able to see Sean outside of Prison, functioning and thriving as a productive citizen. We want to be able to see him fulfill his greatest potential.

Thank you for your time, consideration and understanding.