



Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on the Judiciary
In Support of S.779/H.3121 – An Act Related to Parole
By Colleen Kirby, LWVMA Specialist on Courts and Criminal Justice Reform
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Although 97% of all individuals in custody in Massachusetts are released, fewer are being released with supervision because they are not being granted parole.¹ Many of these individuals would likely have more successful re-entry with supervision. Our current parole board is releasing few individuals (26-28%), perhaps due to concerns of recidivism. Studies have shown better re-entry results when the number of years applicants must serve before a first parole hearing is reduced; using risk-assessment tools, not other considerations; having open parole hearings that are fair (with data collected for improving the process); and presuming an individual is ready for parole unless there are reasons showing they are not to motivate those in custody to work for release and rehabilitation.²

This bill, sponsored by Sen. Brownsberger and Rep. Rogers, increases prisoner participation in work, education, vocational training and/or social skills programs with the goal of rehabilitating the individual and decreasing recidivism. It expands the parole board to nine with qualifications to include at least three with expertise in psychiatry, psychology, social work, or the treatment of substance use disorder. It also calls for the use of evidence-based guidelines for release and collecting data so the public can have oversight of the process. Plus this bill provides for determining the needs of individuals with disabilities, to give them reasonable accommodations and supports so they can be successful on parole.

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts supports a “corrections system which provides opportunities for the rehabilitation of the adult and juvenile offender” and supports “measures to promote the offender's rehabilitation through individualized treatment” and “programs within the Department of Corrections that gradually allow the prisoner more freedom and more responsibility as merited.” We believe this bill will increase the likelihood that an individual will participate in rehabilitative programs if it succeeds in more efficiently releasing people under parole supervision than is current practice.

It is imperative that programs be available to support individuals on parole, and that there are funds to make sure such programs are available to all who need them. We do not want a situation where an individual is granted parole, only to end up waiting for a program spot to open up before being released, which is the case currently for some individuals waiting on conditional parole. We also need to be sure implementation of parole is applied fairly so that there is no disparity based on disability, age, race or ethnicity, or sex for favorable parole outcomes.

If more individuals are released under parole supervision, it is important to collect information to make sure that technical parole violations are not used to lock people up again but are used to help people be successful while on parole.⁴

Thank you for your consideration.

¹ <http://www.plsma.org/current-issues/parole-white-paper/>

² <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/39336-beyond-the-bars-of-hopelessness-how-we-can-revive-parole>

³ <http://www.plsma.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Fact-Sheet-Parole-3.27.17.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2017/04/23/at-least-61-000-nationwide-are-in-prison-for-minor-parole-violations#.PXZdEq8wD>