



Testimony submitted to the Joint Committee on the Judiciary
In Support of H.3457 An Act relative to parole
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Prison sentence lengths have increased in Massachusetts for several decades. Despite a decrease in new commitments, the incarceration rate hasn't declined, in part because of a decline in releases to supervision.¹ Since parole releases have not kept up with the overall prison population, many individuals finish their sentences and are released into the community without supervision and support.² Non-lifer parole hearings require one to three Parole Board members to be present. This bill would increase the number of members of the Parole Board from seven to nine so that more hearings could be held and require more members from social sciences who could judge parole readiness accurately. Parole decisions would be more fairly determined, and people who need it would receive parole supervision, which would cut down on recidivism.³

Since the 1980s, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts has supported “the use of adequately funded and supervised alternative punishments,” “an offender's rehabilitation through individualized treatment,” and “sentence lengths that encourage rehabilitation and reintegration into society.”⁴

An effective Parole Board helps prisoners reenter society and focuses on public safety. Since a large proportion of the individuals who come before the Parole Board have or have had mental health issues, substance use disorder, trauma, disabilities, are emerging adults, or are aging and infirm, it is important that the Parole Board include people trained in psychiatry, psychology, social work, adolescent brain development, and the treatment of substance use disorder. One member of the Parole Board should be a licensed health professional qualified to evaluate the potential parolee's needs and predict success in the community.

The Council of State Governments took part in the Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project and stated: “Because of sensational news headlines or other sources that stigmatize mental illness, some criminal justice professionals may be prone to making the incorrect assumption—which most of the public makes—that mental illness by definition incorporates violent behavior. They may respond to situations on the street, in a courtroom, or at a Parole Board hearing on the basis of common but erroneous perceptions. In such instances, police, judges, and releasing authorities may be especially wary about releasing people with mental illness into the community.”⁵ According to a 2000 Pennsylvania study, “16 percent of all releasees in Pennsylvania served their maximum sentence. For inmates with mental illness, however, 27 percent served their maximum sentence; of those diagnosed as having a serious mental illness, 50 percent served their maximum sentence.”⁶ Mental health professionals are needed on the Parole Board to evaluate these individuals.



This bill would improve the professional composition of the board and establish evidence-based guidelines for granting parole, including use of a Massachusetts-specific validated risk assessment tool, taking good behavior and participation in programs into account. Since studies show that the public needs to be confident that risk assessments are correct, the Parole Board must ensure that the tools remain accurate over time.⁷

This bill takes prisoner disabilities into account, improves transparency, and reduces time between parole reviews. It also facilitates using the Department of Public Health for those who need those services upon parole release. The cost of administering parole is seven to ten times lower than the cost of housing an individual in prison, so an increase in the use of parole saves the Commonwealth money.⁸

If Massachusetts is serious about decreasing mass incarceration, there needs to be an increase in the use of parole. Reconstructing the Parole Board would encourage rehabilitation by providing positive incentives which have been shown to reduce recidivism, strengthen communities,² and reduce costs. For those reasons, LWVMA urges this committee to report H.3457 favorably out of committee. Thank you for your consideration.

¹ <https://massinc.org/research/crime-cost-and-consequences/> and

https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/06/22/parole-board-justice-delayed-and-denied/wPo03f0iFtCId86A7jsdCK/story.html?p1=SectionFront_Feed_AuthorQuery

² https://csgjusticecenter.org/jr/massachusetts/publications/https://csgjusticecenter-org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/jr-in-massachusetts_fourth-presentation-pdf/

³ <http://www.plsma.org/current-issues/parole-white-paper/>

⁴ <https://lwwma.org/advocacy/league-postions/>

⁵ <https://csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health-projects/report-of-the-consensus-project/> pxii, (see p.154 for in depth recommendations)

⁶ <https://csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health-projects/report-of-the-consensus-project/> p. 154

⁷ <https://theappeal.org/risk-assessment-explained/>

⁸ <https://massinc.org/research/revisiting-correctional-expenditure-trends-in-massachusetts/>

⁹ <https://www.vera.org/blog/how-should-probation-and-parole-define-success>