



**Testimony Submitted to the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security
In Support of H.2503/S.1560 An Act to promote equitable access to parole
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts represents 47 local Leagues across the state, from Cape Cod to the Berkshires. We urge you to support H.2503/S.1560 and report it favorably out of committee. This bill aims to elicit parole hearings and decisions that are more fair, timely and transparent.

The proposed changes would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Parole Board. If passed, this bill would require that four board members have expertise in psychology, psychiatry and/or social work and that one board member would be someone directly impacted by incarceration or parole. Increasing the diversity of experience would enable the board to better assess an applicant's readiness for reintegration and ensure that the parolees receive the support and services they need to succeed. Expansion of the board from seven to nine members would facilitate faster decisions. The proposed standard for parole decisions would require the board to present clear and compelling justifications for decisions against granting parole. The requirement to explain the basis for decisions would enable those receiving a negative decision to do the work needed improve their chance of being granted parole in the future. Timeframes specified in the bill would reduce the waiting periods for parole reviews and decisions, and eliminate unreasonable delays in releasing people who are eligible. Finally, the requirement to collect and report demographic data would enable policy makers and the public to be aware of potential bias in the parole process.

The League of Women Voters of the United States supports the exploration and utilization of alternatives to imprisonment, taking into consideration the circumstances and nature of the crime (LWV US 2020). Further, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts advocates sentence lengths that encourage rehabilitation and reintegration into society (LWV Mass 2020). Parole is a key component of rehabilitation, but it often takes far too long for the Board to reach decisions. For parole applicants serving life sentences, the average time between a hearing and a decision is 8 months. By holding people in prison for longer than is required by their sentence and public safety considerations, we are taking precious time from their lives without justification.

In 2020, the League of Women Voters of the United States adopted a resolution to advocate against systemic racism, including in the criminal justice system (LWVUS 2020). Racial disparities are rampant in our criminal justice system, and are most striking between Black and white populations. In 2020, people who identified themselves as white alone made up 69.6% of the state population, but only 40% of the criminally sentenced prison population. (Census Bureau 2020, DOC 2021). At the same time, people who identified themselves as Black only made up 7% of the state population but 29% of the criminally sentence population (Census Bureau 2020, DOC 2021). This baseline disparity in the incarcerated population is compounded by disproportionate parole denials. In 2019, 56% of the people paroled were white, and only 18%



were Black (Parole Board 2020). As a result, flaws in the parole process disproportionately harm people of color, their families and their communities.

Holding people in prison for a longer than necessary and disproportionately denying parole to people of color as clearly shown by the data, is not defensible for a fair and equitable system.. We urge you to move toward correcting the injustices in our parole system by reporting this bill favorably out of committee.

Thank you for your consideration.

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