

Name: Sam Gillis

Title:

Organization or Agency: Incarcerated in CT DOC

Topic: Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

Testimony:

A man, incarcerated at the age of 17 in 1994, was recently granted a parole hearing at the age of 50. When he went before the Board of Pardons and Paroles, he had high expectations of being granted parole under Connecticut's juvenile parole legislation. To his dismay, he was denied.

The board members calmly told him that due to the "severity of the offense" he would have to try again in five years, as if the "severity of the offense" could somehow change in five years.

Another man was sentenced in 1979 to 75 years to life. He was 26 when he committed his offense. He has come up for parole four times and been denied each time. He is now 73 years old and has served over 47 years in the Connecticut state prison system. After one of his denials, the letter he received from the Board stated the following factors: "no benefit for society if released," "inadequate evidence of offender's change," "impact on victim's family," and the ever-present "severity of the offense."

These are just two examples of individuals who, by every correctional metric, have met and exceeded the stated goals of corrections—participating in all offered programs, maintaining steady employment, staying out of trouble, and, for some, completing higher education in prison programs. Yet, they continue to be snubbed by a system which claims to recognize the effort of those who are willing to work towards personal change. Apparently, then, rehabilitation, which is rooted in the belief that people are capable of transformation, can easily be disregarded due to actions, events, and circumstances that, occurring in the past, can never change. When the parole board makes decisions based on the "severity of the offense" and ignores rehabilitation, it denies the very principle it exists to assess: an individual's capacity for change.

Our society holds the expectation that those who work within the judicial, correctional, and parole systems have the knowledge, power, and aptitude to administer rehabilitative techniques. Rehabilitation is frequently referred to as a goal, or destination, to be reached by formerly errant individuals in order for them to be deemed worthy of reentering society. However, those who are tasked with determining an individual's rehabilitation should be able to define what rehabilitation is, for both the incarcerated population and the general public, and the factors needed for it to be achieved. "These factors are exactly the things that parole boards are designed to assess and reward," writes Sarah Staudt, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Prison Policy Initiative.

Making the measure of rehabilitation a standardized process would not only increase the integrity of corrections departments, the courts, and parole boards, but most importantly, it would ensure that those who are truly deserving of parole are granted it. In the 1990s, the Georgia Department of Pardons and Parole implemented a grid system for determining how much time offenders would serve before becoming eligible for parole. The Grid considered several factors such as age at the time of the offense, number of times previously incarcerated, drug use, whether the offender was employed during the offense, and more. Each factor carried with it a value—once these values were added, their sum would determine an individual's "Grid score." The Grid score would then directly determine when the offender would be eligible for parole; it was only up to the incarcerated individual to maintain proper institutional conduct in the meantime. Everyone, at the beginning of their sentence, was provided with a "Grid Sheet" which clearly projected when they could expect to receive parole. Those who received a denial usually understood that they had brought it upon themselves.

The Grid system was by no means perfect—the parole board still had the authority to deviate from the established guidelines and it, at times, made mistakes in its calculations that expectant parolees had to correct. But it put a structure in place for sentencing judges, parole officials, offenders, and victims to follow along with and understand the tentative release of the offender. I was incarcerated within the Georgia Department of Corrections during the time of the Grid system's implementation. Sentenced to 20 years, the Grid called for me to serve 84 months, or seven years, before parole. I served a total of 89 months due to a 5-month stay at the Georgia Department of Corrections Transitional Center and was released in 2001. This is what a standardized parole process looks like.

When incarcerated individuals have at least a modicum of hope, it provides them with an incentive to better themselves. However, the concept of rehabilitation within Connecticut's corrections and parole system is fraught with ambiguity—presenting and simultaneously curtailing hope for those seeking to reintegrate into society. This duality stems from the tension between overly punitive policies that have been in place since the early 1990s and an emerging rehabilitation-centered ethic in our justice system. But if rehabilitation is the destination, the crux that our reintegration into society hinges on, then our courts, prisons, and parole boards have the responsibility of providing us with the directions and resources to arrive there. Otherwise, we do not have a Department of Corrections, but a Department of Punishment.