

Illinois

After passing truth in sentencing legislation, Illinois abolished its parole process. According to Joseph Dole, "Truth in sentencing in Illinois requires that nearly all violent offenders serve 85-100% of their criminal sentences. Prior to the current truth-in-sentencing law's 1998 enactment, offenders served, on average, 44% of their sentences" ("Rethinking Illinois' Truth In Sentencing Laws"). Unlike other states that reduced sentence lengths following the enactment of truth in sentencing laws, Illinois increased the average sentence length, resulting in much longer terms of incarceration than were previously imposed.

Although Illinois does not have a discretionary parole process, the state has a 15-member Prisoner Review Board, established as an independent state agency meant to review parole violations and hear the "c-number cases." C-numbers are a group of individuals sentenced to long, indeterminate sentences prior to 1979 and they are the only individuals eligible for parole in the state. The Prisoner Review Board is meant to counterbalance the department of corrections, but with a politically appointed board--appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state senate--this counterbalance has not materialized in practice. Law enforcement officers are heavily represented on the board, in addition to state's attorneys and prosecutors. Illinois does not mandate any particular credentials for serving on the Prisoner Review Board, though members should be evenly split between the major political parties. The Prisoner Review Board usually grants 1-3 paroles for c-numbers per year.

Parole Illinois, founded out of a think tank inside Stateville prison, is one of the organizations working on reinstating discretionary parole in Illinois. All of Parole Illinois's work is done via consensus model between people on the inside and people in the free world. Parole Illinois has been building community support and educating the general public on the issues of parole and long terms sentencing through a variety of events and meetings. The organization has met with several legislators in Springfield and had a bill in the Illinois house this year. Parole Illinois hopes to connect and train a network of "volunteer lobbyists" that will spread education, around the state and at the capitol, about the need for parole in Illinois. Parole Illinois also invests in the power of individual stories from individuals who are incarcerated and their loved ones, bringing family members of individuals serving long-term sentences aboard as lobbyists. Incarcerated individuals contribute at every stage, by writing to legislators, making art for campaigns, authoring legislation, writing campaign materials, and contacting family members that might be interested in joining the organization.

The Prisoner Review Board is also responsible for overseeing the clemency applications in Illinois. Applications consist of information about the offense, a personal narrative, police reports, and other items. The Prisoner Review Board hears clemency cases, which in certain cases may include an in-person hearing, such as if the victim, incarcerated individual, or state's attorney requests one, and then makes confidential recommendations to the governor. The governor has sole discretion as to whether to grant clemency following these recommendations. The most current estimates suggest that no commutations for individuals serving life sentences

have been granted in the last ten years. If a clemency petition is denied, an individual must wait one year before reapplying.

The newly founded Illinois Prison Project pairs incarcerated elderly, infirm, and veteran individuals with volunteer attorneys or legal employees that help them organize, compile, and file their executive clemency applications. The goal is to file all of these clemency applications in the same calendar year, in order to present them to the governor as something akin to a class in a class-action suit. The Illinois Prison Project hopes to significantly decarcerate using clemency, given the paucity of other viable options for release. Currently, 1/7 people in Illinois corrections will die in prison, and 12% of Illinois's prison population is elderly. By 2030, a full 30% of the population will be elderly, making this group a particularly important one to organize around in the coming years, with great potential to yield significant decarceration in the state.

Sources

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