



October 2, 2018

The Honorable Stewart Greenleaf
Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee
Senate Box 203012
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3012

The Honorable Daylin Leach
Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee
Senate Box 203017
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3012

Dear Chairman Greenleaf and Minority Chairman Leach:

We write in support of SB 942 (Street, District 3), a bill to give parole eligibility to people serving life without parole after they have served at least 15 years of their term.

FAMM is a national, nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a more fair and effective justice system that respects our American values of individual accountability and dignity while keeping our communities safe. Since 1991, we have promoted commonsense reforms to state and federal sentencing laws and prison policies through advocacy, public education, grassroots organizing, and empowering families to tell their stories. We are not against punishment or prisons. We simply believe that sentences should fit the crime and the offender in each and every case and should be cost-effective for taxpayers and public safety.

Undoubtedly, life without parole sentences in Pennsylvania are imposed for serious crimes that cause serious and lasting harm to victims and communities. We do not intend to minimize the seriousness of the harm caused by offenses like murder, and we of course believe people must be held accountable for these crimes. However, we also believe that life without parole sentences – even for the most serious crimes – fail to provide incentives for rehabilitation and opportunities to recognize it. The possibility of parole encourages those serving life sentences to demonstrate good behavior, follow prison rules, avail themselves of rehabilitative programming, and prepare to return to society as a law-abiding citizen. The possibility of parole provides a hope of reunion to prisoners and their families and may very well keep those connections alive. Strong family ties are proven to reduce recidivism for those released from prison.

Furthermore, Senator Street's bill will benefit the state fiscally. Pennsylvania is an outlier in its use of life without parole sentences. Pennsylvania has the second-highest lifer population in the country – about 5,500 in 2016. This population is also aging, with an average age of 47.5 years. Aging prisoners are expensive prisoners, with higher medical costs and greater incidence of debilitating illnesses and age-related disabilities. As prisoners age, they also become less likely to recidivate and pose less of a public safety risk. Incarcerating a growing number of lifers fills prison cells with people who are costly to incarcerate but pose little threat. It would be more cost-effective for taxpayers and increase public safety to give lifers a chance at parole so that some of those cells could instead be available for younger, higher-risk offenders. The money saved from the unnecessary continued incarceration of aging lifers could instead be invested in victim services, community policing, or better rehabilitative programming in prison – all services that reduce recidivism and make Pennsylvania safer.

Senator Street's legislation is reasonable. Fifteen years is a lengthy sentence, even for a violent offense, and the bill does not require or guarantee parole after that time. The parole board would merely get an opportunity to consider release, hold a hearing, and hear the input of the prisoner, his or her family, the community, law enforcement, and crime survivors. In exceptional cases, crime survivors themselves may advocate the granting of parole, wishing to recognize the offender's rehabilitation and give them a second chance. Currently, such crime survivors have no ability to have such a desire fulfilled.

Because Senator Street's bill is a reasonable proposal that will save the state money, focus limited and expensive resources on high-risk offenders, and give lifers both encouragement and opportunity to rehabilitate themselves and reenter society, we support SB 942 and urge the legislature to advance the bill.

Thank you for considering our views, and please feel free to contact us if we can assist you in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Molly Gill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Molly" being more prominent than the last name "Gill".

Molly Gill
Vice President of Policy

cc: Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee