

To:

**Honorable Senator Katie Muth, Chair
Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee
November 4, 2021**

Re: Eliminating Lifetime Parole – Support

Good Morning. I want to thank Senator Muth, Senator Street, Senator Williams, and Senator Schwank for sponsoring this essential hearing on eliminating lifetime and long-term parole in Pennsylvania. I also want to thank the Abolitionist Law Center, Color of Change and Dignity and Power Now for championing this issue as advocates for criminal legal reform.

My name is Bobby Harris, this month marks 4 years of what I'd like to call my rebirth or second chance, and I'm pleased to stand in solidarity and support of the starting process of Eliminating Lifetime and Long-term Parole. Unlocking these invisible shackles would assist in removing some systemic barriers that we face every day; allowing myself and others like me the second chance that some of us daydreamed about or imagine but can now really be obtainable. I'm present to share my life experience with you all so that I can provide clarity and a few perspectives.

At the age of 15, I was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, I want to answer the question of how did that happen, before moving forward. I was raised by a single Black Women (Nettie Harris), it was a short lived opportunity for the two of us. At the age of 7 yrs., old my mother was murdered and I witnessed the soul of my universe snipped out of my life. Resulting in me becoming an orphan child at the tender age of 7 years old, even now I have this assumption that no one in my family knew how to respond to a suicidal 7 year old child and the affected during a traumatic ordeal, I felt alone and shut down. I didn't have the family support nor strengthening guidance of a support system that explained the fight or flight process that I was forced to create inside of me because of the last live shared memory of my mom and I. Knowing that I was sentenced to life, I found ways to live through bettering my mind, body, and spirit. I decided to dedicate myself to self-development and education, I entered the carceral system with a 3rd grade education, I taught myself to read and write from the inspiration of the Elder Prisoners that saw value and worth in me. From there, I knew it was imperative for me to understand me more and understand where and how that 7 year-old child could have balanced the heartache and pain of life's losses when losing the universal love of a mother. I dedicated my time to understanding the usage of words and sound due to my lack of education and comprehension in any type of social environment/atmosphere. I did not stop there, I completed a correspondence course in child psychology through the Stratford Career Institute earn my degree in child psychology from the Stratford Career Institute, enhanced my growth and development.

Continuing the commitment of self-development, 2005, led me to become a mentor to other incarcerated men, the experience allowed me to produce, author, and activate the "Awakening Our Manhood" Mentoring Program, and become progressively active by addressing prison concerns while creating solutions. Becoming the President of the L.I.F.E. Association (an acronym for Life Isn't For Ever), an organization that still exists today, and on my watch, we were able to create the Keystone Scholarship, which benefits children whose parents were victims of crime. In Less, than 30 days, we raised \$7,000.00 for two (2) young females towards their education Manifesting from within the State Correctional Institution @ Dallas.

I served 29 years in prison until being released on November 5, 2017, following the Supreme Court decision in Miller v. Alabama in which the Court ruled that mandatory sentences of life without the

possibility of parole are unconstitutional for juveniles. I remind myself that every time I speak up, I represent 524 Pennsylvania inmates who committed crimes while under the age of 18. Since being home, I've served on the District Attorney's Criminal Victim's Advocacy Committee, organized the Joint Democratic Policy Committee & PA Legislative Black Caucus Hearing on criminal justice reform inside the State Correctional Institution at Dallas, and was asked to speak beside/for Circle Up, which is a restorative justice group, mentoring and community investment also speaking in support of changing the laws with respect to Death by Incarceration and Probation Reform at the Pennsylvania State Capitol Rotunda right here in Harrisburg.

The tools that I used to redirect and focus my energy, while incarcerated to create productive movement for reforming and evolving was still ignited in me, I founded Unincarcerated Minds, Inc., a non-profit organization that provides socio-economic opportunities for systemically marginalized communities, especially formerly incarcerated individuals in the Philadelphia and Montgomery County areas as CEO/President.

Last but not least about my life, I became the owner/operator of BR Trucking LLC. This is my first year, I own 2 delivery vehicles and my goal is to be able to employ other individuals 1 at a time that have been systematically impacted or affected by way of incarceration. I bring this up because since being home, I've heard this term/phrase "Social Equity," and at first, I ran because the advocacy portion of explaining this term said "marijuana only." However, Social Equity is, as defined by the National Academy of Public Administration, "the fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; and the fair and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy." I make a collective of 20 formerly incarcerated individuals that are dedicated and committed to creating an eco-system within our communities and expanding the access and opportunity to others by empowering them via employment, enrichment and other motivational tools.

According to the Census, Blacks or African Americans own approximately 124,551 businesses, my next steps for myself and other is to find out if we are counted in the statistics. I question these things because I know that businesses are to create a relationship with the SBA and I'm here to tell you, when you're on parole (15 U.S.C. 634(b)(6), Public Law 111-5, 123 Stat. 115; Public Law 111-240, 124 Stat. 2504; Public Law 116-260, 134 Stat. 1182. Source: 61 FR 3235, Jan. 31, 1996, unless otherwise noted), it's a relationship that we are hoping to build but at the moment, I'm ineligible for loans and relief.

I share that because we're required to maintain employment. However, we've taken it a step farther as entrepreneurs. I acknowledge that people see me as a free individual and question what more can I want or ask for, I desire true freedom that has never been experienced since the age of 6 as I already shared the story of my 7 year-old life with you. There are still these invisible shackles on me that creates a feeling that people assume I'm ready to violate when they may have never done time yet alone 29 consecutive years and I'm here to tell you that I am here to reduce recidivism, not repeat it. I have an honest loving family that continues to grow, some of them have never seen the inside of the cage and it will stay that way, some are still inside where I'm committed to reminding them of the necessary tools in order to balance and heal. And again but not least, myself and 524 juvenile lifers, we've landed our first jobs, as grocery store cashiers and line cooks, addiction counselors, paralegals, supervisors and ED's. We've learned to drive, getting assistance with renting our first apartments, trying to establish credit, and navigating through unfamiliar relationships. We know that there are statues according to the Board of

Pardons to start a clemency process, I'm sharing, again, that Lifetime and Long-Term parolees be in the conversations more while knowing that there are some steps that need to be made and taken on both sides with said statues, deliverable, requirements and time.

This conversation that you are experiencing with us is a huge step in what's possible and attainable and I would like to thank you again Senator Muth, Senator Street, Senator Williams, and Senator Schwank for opening the floor and hearing us.

I'm here to serve in any way that I can and again, much gratitude for your time.

Bobby Harris

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