

TESTIMONY OF DONNELL DRINKS AT THE PENNSYLVANIA SENATE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL  
HEARING ON ELIMINATING LIFETIME PAROLE ON NOVEMBER 4TH, 2021

*SUBMITTED VIA EMAIL*

Good morning. I want to thank Senator Muth, Senator Street, Senator Williams and Senator Schwank for sponsoring this important hearing on ending 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 leading on this work as advocates for a more humane criminal legal system.

My name is Donnell Drinks. I am a proud husband, father and grandfather, the eldest of three sons, a community anti-violence leader, a gun violence prevention advocate, mentor for at-risk youth, a photographer, a published author, an artist, teacher, motivational speaker and a born and raised Pennsylvanian.

I am also serving a lifetime parole sentence in Pennsylvania, which has the highest number of people serving parole in the country.

Today I want to share with you all my story of life on parole, share some of the things I've been able to accomplish in spite of parole, not because of it, and most importantly - advocate for a parole system that supports a person's ability to grow in a positive way.

First I want to share a little background about myself: At 17 years old, I was sentenced to death which was later reduced to a life in prison without the possibility of parole. I subsequently served 27 ½ years of that sentence before I was released in July 2018 to lifetime parole due to a 2012 US Supreme Court ruling that deemed mandatory life sentences for children to be unconstitutional. In 2016, the court made that ruling retroactive.

When I was arrested, I was a misguided, frustrated, angry child with a mother who had a substance abuse issue and an absentee father. I am not sharing that

information to excuse what I did, but rather to give further content to my story. I've come to learn through first hand experiences how adverse conditions, lack of parental guidance and limited resources can lead a person into a heightened state of survival at all times. I truly believe that crime in general and specifically gun violence is a poverty issue, and I use my past experience to relate with young women and men today in order to create the support system I needed when I was younger.

One of the ways I've been able to support young men and women in my community is through my work with G.R.O.W.N (Gaining Respect Over Our Worst Night). My nonprofit organization I co-founded with another formerly life sentenced juvenile. Our organization is designed to work as a conduit for change and empowerment, for people to highlight their growth and maturity over adverse situations that occurred in their lives.

Through various projects the men and women of G.R.O.W.N., exercise their civic responsibilities and continuously strive to better the conditions of their individual communities and society as a whole. G.R.O.W.N also includes victims, and anyone who is trying to overcome the worst night in their lives. Especially people who experienced those nights as a child, like I did. G.R.O.W.N. has achieved a stellar reputation in the city of Philadelphia and have partnered with the Office of Violence Prevention, Philadelphia School District, Philadelphia District Attorney, Churches, Masjids, Civic associations, The Philadelphia Branches of N.A.A.C.P. and ACLU.

I've also worked in the Philadelphia District Attorney Office as their Crime prevention and Intervention specialist. In 2020, while working at the ACLU as their Election Protection Coordinator for the entire state of Pennsylvania, I was instrumental in turning Pennsylvania blue again. I currently work for the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY). Since my release I have done many public speaking events – including institutions of higher learning from Ivy League colleges to community colleges.

Again, I want to make it clear that I've been able to achieve these things in spite of parole, not because of it. I don't want someone to read my resume and think that the

restrictions of parole are the reasons for my success. In fact, it's quite the opposite. As a result of the restrictions I have it has limited my earning potential and development of youth programs. Programs that have proven to save lives and produce civic minded responsible men and women.

People may think that making parole more restrictive is a preventative measure, but in reality, it only hinders a person's ability to grow in the positive. You can stifle positivity through parole. And I've experienced that stifling of my own spirit first hand.

As I shared earlier, I am on lifetime parole. It's hard to describe the day to day anxiety that comes with that sentence, not just for me, but for my family.

From the little things, like having to turn down speaking engagements, or change the supermarket our family goes to because even though it was across the street, it was technically in a different county....to more traumatizing things like not being able to attend a relative's funeral.

I was fortunate enough to leave prison with a support system. I have my family and was able to get a job easily, but the day to day anxiety of parole, and the financial obligations of parole, on top of trying to re-acclimate myself to society, has been a challenge.

The financial burden of paying bills for parole is something that a lot of people aren't aware of. It takes a toll on your life, and how you plan for things like retirement knowing you have to include fines for the rest of your life.

And then there's the day to day anxiety and fear that you might cross a street and be in a different county by accident. You're worried about being violated and ripped away from your family just for picking up milk from the wrong store.

I remember once I was driving my cousin to a housewarming party during my first year home. We were in west Philadelphia and due to street construction we were forced to follow a detoured route, and were totally unaware we were one block into

Yeadon. This was only known once we saw a marked Yeadon police car. I instantly became nauseous, sweating and noticeably shaken out of fear being violated that I immediately turned around. It sounds like a little thing, but those little things add up. My no show has affected my relationship with a family member as I was too ashamed and embarrassed to share the true reason I didn't come.

Two of my three precious grandkids live in Harrisburg, which is in a different county so I need permission any time I go to see them. It's hindered our ability to be close, and my ability to dote over them as a grandparent.

I try my best to internalize a lot of my conflict, but it's impossible for your loved ones not to pick up on it. My family has had to alter their whole lifestyles, vacations plans, their dreams, and hopes to accommodate my parole. And I don't wish that for them for the rest of my life.

A life without parole for me would mean freedom. Real and true freedom. It would mean being able to expand my mentorship and the work of G.R.O.W.N to more communities who need it across the country. It would expand my life cycle. It would mean less stress for me and my family. It would mean true happiness.

Being on parole, you spend so much of your time worrying about surviving, it's hard to focus on thriving. Life without parole would mean more time to dedicate to what you CAN DO, and less to what you CAN NOT.

My hope is for everyone in my position to be able to overcome their nightmares, to succeed, and to grow in a positive way. And I know that the best way for that to happen is to reconsider the laws governing parole that force people to endure more anxiety, fear, restrictions, and stifling of their positive potential.

We have served our time. Now we want to be positive and valuable contributors to our families and communities. Please give us the opportunity to flourish.

Thank you for your time again.