

TESTIMONY OF AMBER SUNSHINE GRIGGS AT THE PENNSYLVANIA SENATE
DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL HEARING ON ELIMINATING LIFETIME PAROLE ON
NOVEMBER 4TH, 2021

Hello, Good Morning. I want to thank Senator Muth, Senator Street, Senator Williams, and Senator Schwank for sponsoring this critical 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 championing this issue as advocates for criminal legal reform.

We all know that Pennsylvania has some of the hardest parole laws in the country, including the second highest number of people serving on parole. I am a Parolee. I am very honored to join you here today to share my story with you, to use my experience to advocate for those who have been and are impacted by the parole system which is largely designed to punish rather than provide care.

I am under no delusion that I have made mistakes in my life, some greater than others. I will live with the choices that I have made in my life forever. I realize now as an adult the importance of choices and the impact they have. As a youth I never really thought about that.

If I told you my story began while in prison that would be a lie, it started before then even though this is not an excuse but it is the truth. Things happened in my youth that I didn't know how to properly deal with and my life spiraled out of control. I found myself on a destructive path and at the age of 18 years old I committed a crime. My first adult offense. I spent 2yrs and 9 months in the county jail in which I took programs and graduated high school since I was still in high school when I got arrested. Then later on I got sentenced to ten to twenty years in prison. I took advantage of what was offered and I also took the optical program and graduated and obtained my ABO certification as well. The irony of how prison programs and the educational department work is that if you're serving a long time, like I was, you do not have access to all the programs until you are close to your minimum date. Most times you're educating yourself and working on your own self growth.

I decided while in prison if I wanted different, I had to do different. That meant working on my own self. Doing a lot of self-reflection and facing things that I once before didn't deal with, facing my own demons which I did and that was a process in itself. I grew up in prison became a woman and no longer that 18 yrs. old girl I once was. I didn't want prison to be my life nor did I ever want to impact anybody like I had already. It was my journey of growth.

When it came time for the parole process, I knew I was ready. It went well at least from my perspective but I was sadly mistaken. I waited for 15 weeks for a green sheet, for it to say I was denied parole at that time. They gave me a year hit and said I was a risk to society which never made sense to me because I changed and grew so much as a person. Having to tell my family was the hardest and hearing their devastation while dealing with my own, that about broke me. The second time around was very mentally and emotionally draining. I thought I was going to break. Then I got my green sheet and I got granted parole it was such as happy day for me, a day I thought about for so many years was almost here after doing 11 years. I was going home finally at the age of 29.

I was released on Sept. 15th 2016 I'll never forget that day, being with my family and regaining my freedom. It was emotionally and so overwhelming all at the same time. The world has changed greatly. It was a culture shock. I didn't know how to use the new phones and technology had advanced a lot from when I was home last. Learning everything and learning how to fill out papers I never filled out before. When I went to set up with my basic benefits the security guard had to help me because I had no idea how to use the kiosk and didn't know which one I needed. I realized prison really didn't prepare me for this new world. Going in at such a young age that never did any of these things and everything being new it was overwhelming.

In many ways I was blessed. I had my freedom, I had a support system, a roof over my head, and my family. Some people don't have any of that. My first job was where my mother worked at the time and gave me a job off the strength of her and they never hired anybody on parole. So, I knew I had to make an impression and do great, that I did. It was janitorial work but it was a job so it didn't matter to me. My second job was at a warehouse doing steel rings, backbreaking work but it was another step and paid more than the last job. I was the only girl and I made sure I kept up with the men and held my weight as well. Once I got my license and purchased a cheap car good enough to get me where I needed. I started going to optical places and handing in my resume in. Some places it was a no and others wanted to but my background check would come

back and I wouldn't get the job even though it was over ten years ago. The one place I walked into was a place I sent a resume to while still incarcerated and they gave me a call back while in prison but I got a hit. They hired me and I am still there to this present day. I would say that is God's divine intervention at its finest. I am one of their best workers and their top sales person. I am great at what I do. I always want to do great because if another parolee comes behind me and wants a job my performance will reflect their chances of getting that job. It creates a new ideal and changes a person's perspective upon parolees and be more prone to give that person a chance than none at all. I also utilize my job and drop seeds of life to people who come in there. Share my story as well when I feel it is needed if it helps redirect them in life. You can make an impact anywhere you go.

Now let me talk about my experience on parole. You may think I am about to tell a horror story but the truth is I don't have a horror story at all. I've been blessed with good parole agents that actually want to see me succeed and have been in my corner and helped me along the way, even my current one. Hearing some of the issues some of my friends dealt with or currently deal with and not having theirs in their corner or guidance I really been blessed.

I've been home a little over five years now and I haven't violated or got in any trouble. I've been doing right. Being monitored all the time is a bit much at times. If I feel like going for a spontaneous drive one day to another region well I can't just go do it I have to ask for permission before I do it. It makes getting a job hard and even housing because a lot of places are not really open to a parolee living in their place or working for them. People can be judgmental and hear that and now they no longer see a person but a felon and a parolee. It's a label that will stay and it isn't the greatest feeling in the world when you know who you are now and it's not the same as then.

I remember going to Lancaster to set up my fines and cost payment plan and realized they didn't care if you just got out or not they wanted their money regardless if you didn't have a job yet let alone money. That is stressful all by itself when you're trying to stand on your feet. Thank God my family helped me because you have a time frame to set it up and make sure you make your payments or you could be violated and sent back to prison for something so small.

At times waiting for your agent to show up because they give an around about time they'll be there waiting an hour or two when you have things to do and needs to get done. But that is a reminder that your life isn't your own. You have to deal with it and accept it because it is a part of the process. They also have a lot of caseloads and are spread thin trying to see everyone. I've been home five years and still have to see mine every three months.

When being paroled to a family member house they have to remove things like their wine or play guns that are fake. The process they have to go through just so your able to live there or those type of things could get me violated and sent back because it is a rule. Most things normal people wouldn't think twice about.

I live in a rough neighborhood and I wanted to carry pepper spray for my own safety because sometimes I have to park a couple blocks away and it is dark out sometimes when I get home from work and I am a female. But I am not allowed to because I am on parole even though it would have been so I could protect myself and you can't even defend yourself if you are attacked because you're on parole it could be a violation. Makes you realize you are really defenseless and helpless in those type of situations if it would ever occur.

I got pulled over once for my car lights not being on, a simple traffic stop. Well it really wasn't simple at all. I was nervous because it was my first time being pulled over since I've been home and I'm on parole. The situation just wasn't right because the questions that were being asked it was an interrogation. Did I take drugs, did I have drugs in my car, did I have a gun in my car, have I been to prison, how long did I do, was I on parole and who was my parole agent and I answered all their questions and he took my information and then all these cop cars started pulling up and I knew something wasn't right and all this for car lights. He came back and asked me to step out the car and go stand by his car. I gave them permission to search my car no reason not to because I didn't do anything except forget to turn my lights on. They didn't find anything and let me go with no ticket but standing out there that long and what happened was humiliating. I couldn't believe it. But due to the area and the stigma of being a parolee and having a record I would say

brought forth that. There is a stigma when on parole and having a felon even when people say there isn't but the truth is you do.

People say just do what you are supposed to do and do right and you'll do fine and that is true for the most part but that isn't always true. There is a stigma with it as well. I feel after years of doing well and being productive citizen there should be an opportunity to apply to get your parole lifted. If a person has shown with actions and not just words that they have changed and

don't get in trouble why not give that opportunity? Why spread agents thin and spend tax dollars when there is an opportunity to do something different.

I just want to fulfill my purpose in life and when I depart this world knowing I left a positive impact upon it. I shared my story with you today so it could give you another perspective and to see that people do change. I am no longer that 18-year-old girl but an amazing woman now. Hopefully today you are more open minded to the idea and of the possibilities and know that parolees are not just parolees but they're people as well. I hope you truly reconsider the laws governing parole that force people to endure a second sentence when they come home from prison. Take a moment to step out of your shoes and step into another's so you can gain a greater understanding because with greater understanding comes greater knowledge and will create a path for change.

Thank you for allowing me to speak and for your time as well. Have a great day.

Amber- Sunshine Griggs