



pennsylvania

OFFICE OF VICTIM ADVOCATE

Giving Crime Victims a Voice

Courage • Strength • Resilience

Op Ed: Let's Talk about Compassionate Reform **Jennifer Storm | September 17, 2020**

Victims and survivors of violent crimes are often faced with questions about forgiveness. About healing. About compassion.

Individuals often misunderstand the healing journey of a survivor, making comments and judgements based on how they *think* they might feel if their own loved one was murdered. *Haven't they served long enough? Time will heal all wounds. The offender has suffered, too, behind bars. No justice can bring their loved one back anyway, so what's the harm in releasing the inmate?*

These expectations are frequently thrust onto victims, placing the burden on the victim to forgive. To heal. To dole out compassion to a criminal that offered no compassion to them or their family member in the midst of committing atrocious acts of violence.

The criminal justice reform measures that continue in Pennsylvania are absolutely necessary; there are many areas in which our systematic approach needs to be improved to ensure safer communities and more equitable outcomes. There is also a current focus on second chances and rehabilitation; these are impactful concepts that OVA and many survivors strongly support, including

- probation reform that seeks to eliminate long or overly intensive supervision past the point of evidentiary effectiveness
- expanded access to the Board of Pardons
- reduced sentences for non-violent offenders who pose no risk to the community
- restorative justice programs where safe, appropriate, and victim-centered

There is an area of reform, however, that still lacks a balanced approach. Blanket parole eligibility for those serving a life sentence for a murder conviction is a bill in search of balance. As it is currently written, this proposal would make every person serving a life sentence in PA eligible for parole.

This means the of the man who, after raping his two daughters for most of their lives, broke into their home on Christmas Eve and killed both of them and their mother, in retaliation for coming forward, while leaving his infant granddaughter in a pool of blood on the floor – his case would be in the same parole eligibility category as those who were the “lookout” for their friend who committed a crime resulting in a death.

Blanket provisions are not reform. Yes, let us redefine our justice system in a way that resets the scales for those who have been wronged by that very system. But let us not smite ourselves, risking public safety, by categorizing unequal crimes as equal.

When an individual becomes parole eligible – when they’ve served their minimum sentence - they are able to petition the PA Parole Board for consideration every year thereafter, regardless of suitability or previous denials. Many individuals have remarked “*well, blanket eligibility doesn’t guarantee release, let the Parole Board sort it out.*” Victims/survivors of crime are an integral part of the parole decision making process; they are afforded the right to provide their input to the Board and identify their safety needs. Providing eligibility to everyone who is serving a life sentence – as the bill is written – means that little girl who was left for dead now must contend with notifications and testimony opportunities every single year, ripping open her wounds to ensure that paroling decision makers understand her concerns. As policy makers in governing systems, it is incumbent upon our lawmakers to be honorable gatekeepers. Pulling a victim/survivor through an endless cycle of systematic trauma year after year delivers no justice, no balance, and certainly no reform.

Pennsylvania must stand in support of all its people. We can do this by way of one-time consideration through the Board of Pardons, who have gallantly increased their caseload and are granting more clemency opportunities than any board in our state’s history. This process does not create an endless loop of victimization for survivors, and while many find it very hard to consider the release of the person who murdered their loved one, some welcome the opportunity to be supportive.

This is where we must be ever mindful, however, that no one defines healing for a survivor other than that survivor. When family members do come forward to speak, we must be sensitive to their input and the process that allows for it. Their forgiveness is not a requirement to their healing. Forgiveness is intensely personal and even if a victim/survivor is able to forgive and has compassion that should not be automatically considered a demarcation that they must support the release of that offender. This notion is being tossed around by, not only those supporting blanket parole, but various individuals in the justice system and it is causing added harm.

Let us continue to blaze the trails of reform through an honorable bail system, by diverting nonviolent offenders from prison into programs that actually rehabilitate instead of continue cycles of abuse, via supervision reductions for those who pose no risk to society. Let us also seek to eliminate mandatory life sentences for those offenders who never took or played an active role in the taking of another life. All of these – and so much more – are opportunities to reduce the wasting of taxpayer dollars, decrease harm, and bridge healing.

Our justice system is designed to provide accountability for the crime committed, which does not include a requirement of victims/survivors to absolve those who caused harm. The expectation that they do so is unrealistic, unfair, and unjust.

Jennifer Storm serves as the [Acting Commonwealth Victim Advocate](#).