

VIA Testimony
Compassionate release amendment to S18

Vermont Interfaith Action would like to speak in support of expanding the opportunity for those who are incarcerated to be released through parole or furlough if their combined age and medical condition warrants such a release.

Vermont Interfaith Action, or VIA, is a faith-based, grassroots coalition of 68 member and affiliated congregations throughout Vermont that work together to effect systemic change around issues of social justice. We represent about 15,000 everyday Vermonters who care about their friends, families, and neighbors and try to make compassion and justice a reality for those who are most in need. Our congregations are from the Protestant, Catholic, Unitarian Universalist, and Jewish faith traditions, and we have individual members who are Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

One of our local organizing committees, composed mostly of Episcopalians and Presbyterians in Chittenden County, has been advocating for compassion and justice in Vermont's corrections system for the past six years. In addition to our long-standing goal of trying to improve preparation for release for those who are incarcerated, it has come to our attention by speaking with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals that Vermont's current provisions for early release for those with medical conditions could also be improved.

Persons who have or have had cancer, heart disease, or other serious and chronic illnesses and who are at an advanced age are at low risk to the public safety if they are released so that they can continue treatment or simply convalescence among supportive friends and family in a home setting. In addition to showing empathy and humaneness to these folks, this practice has the added benefit of freeing up beds in our facilities for riskier inmates and of saving the state money for their care.

Debbie Ingram, our Executive Director, has been corresponding with one such incarcerated woman over the last couple of months. This woman, whom we'll call Sylvia, had a bout with lymphoma during her 17-year sentence and was at first hopeful that Act 91, originally H150, enacted in 2018, would help her. She was disappointed that it did not. Then last year Sylvia was hopeful that the Senate proposal for compassionate release would make it through the House as well. She was disappointed that it did not. Now she is once again hopeful that she can get a chance at compassionate release. She wrote this to Debbie recently:

"DOC made it plain that since I am functioning and in remission from the cancer, I am fine. Maybe on the surface, but as an "elderly" inmate (ugh!) with 85% of my min served and an uncertain medical future, I think age/time served/low risk language is needed in a bill. I am sure there are males in this category and others, both male and female, will be in the future. It could save the state money and free up beds for inmates out of state. This was the original purpose of H150 in 2017 and according to an article in the Free Press at the time, there was no opposition and even the Commissioner of Corrections at the time, Lisa Menard, concurred. This is what I hope to see introduced and passed."

As people of faith, we at VIA respectfully ask that you find it in your hearts to show compassion to those who have made terrible mistakes but who have also suffered from illness and advanced age. We believe that everyone is more than the worst mistake they have made in their life and that when they are no longer at risk to others and are suffering themselves, it will reflect better on our society to show them some compassion.

Thank you for listening.