



Families for Justice Reform

# PENNSYLVANIA: SECOND CHANCES AGENDA



## THE PROBLEM – Irrational and Ineffective Sentencing Laws

Pennsylvania sends too many people to prison for far longer than necessary. Sentencing laws that severely limit pathways to relief from excessive and unending punishment make the problem even worse. As a result, Pennsylvania has thousands of aging and sick people whose continued incarceration serves absolutely no purpose.

Pennsylvania's overreliance on harsh punishments, combined with a near-elimination of any meaningful mechanism for reviewing these sentences, has contributed to a prison population that has exploded by nearly 300 percent since the early 1980s. Although Pennsylvania did begin to reduce its prison population to a certain extent over the last decade, the drastic increase in the number of people serving long and life without parole sentences continues.

Pennsylvania's punitive sentencing practices offer no discernable benefit to the public. They create significant negative consequences and compound harm. In addition to the fundamental unfairness of depriving people of freedom unnecessarily, Pennsylvania's approach to sentencing wastes money, separates families, exacerbates racial disparities, and deprives people who have been incarcerated for their mistakes of nearly any opportunity for redemption or mercy.

## THE SOLUTION – Expand Opportunities for Second Chances

To address this crisis, Pennsylvania must reform its sentencing laws to allow for individualized and appropriate punishments, and create more opportunities to review sentences and to provide incarcerated people with a path toward a second chance. In Pennsylvania, this can be accomplished in several ways.

- **End Life Without Parole** – Repeal the mandatory life sentence statutes for first- and second-degree murder, allow opportunities for parole for people with these convictions, and make these reforms retroactive. All of us change and mature, and our laws should reflect that. Pennsylvania's judges should have the discretion to impose individualized, appropriate sentences, and review unjust sentences.
- **Allow Medical/Elderly Release and Expand Compassionate Release** – More than 20 percent of Pennsylvania's prison population is over the age of 50, and many of these people have chronic health conditions. Maintaining such an enormous population of aging and ill people in our prisons is expensive, unnecessary, and unjust. Pennsylvania should create mechanisms to release people in prison based on age or medical necessity.
- **Expand Clemency** – In Pennsylvania, clemency is the only hope of relief for people serving very long and life without parole sentences. Pennsylvania commuted the life sentences of 285 people between 1971 and 1994, but that number dropped by more than 90 percent over the following two decades. Commutations are a necessary mechanism to address injustice and support second chances, and their use should be substantially expanded.

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