



Joseph (left) and his wife, Ruth

What happens when someone in prison gets very sick and there is no mechanism in place for the system to allow for compassion? That’s the situation that Joseph Palmer and his family are in right now. They – and many others like them – urgently need the state to put medical parole in place.

In April of 2019, Joseph Palmer burglarized a Fresh N Easy store in the Upper Chichester Township of Pennsylvania. He made off with cartons of cigarettes and some cash. After his arrest, law enforcement found the value of his take and damages to be less than \$1500.

Joseph pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a term of no less than two years and no greater than five. In the “other” section of his official sentencing document it is noted, “Stay away from Fresh N Easy.”

But more than two years later, Joseph, now 60, is experiencing a far worse punishment than the court intended. When he entered prison, he was relatively healthy. Soon after, though, he developed ulcerative colitis, which has gone untreated to the point that he now weighs 96 pounds. He has been to the hospital on numerous occasions, and each time he returns to prison, he cannot recover because the prison doesn't follow up with the necessary care. And making matters far worse, Joseph has contracted COVID twice. In April, he spent six weeks in the hospital for a pulmonary embolism, then a punctured lung. Now in the prison infirmary, Joseph is on 24-hour oxygen, gravely ill.

Joseph would have been eligible for parole in July of this year – but because he's so sick, he's not “medically eligible.” It's a terrible conundrum: He can't get out and get the treatment that will save his life – because he's too ill.

His wife Ruth is terrified and angry. “My husband is slowly starving to death. I have not been able to contact any prison officials about him. I am desperate for information – even just to know where he is and how he's doing – and I can't get a straight answer. It's a nightmare.”

As it now stands, there is no solution to Joseph's agony. There is no mechanism of medical parole that could help him, no “safety net” of compassion and common sense that would recognize that this man was not sentenced to die in prison.

Cigarettes and cash, an admonishment to “stay away from Fresh N Easy” and parole eligibility that would set him free in a matter of weeks. Instead, Joseph Palmer got far worse.

“I am not disputing he has made numerous mistakes,” Ruth says. “He's been fighting drug addiction his whole life, and it's led him to really poor choices. But the system has failed him. From way back – when he was 15, he got in trouble and was tried as an adult. The system has helped to make him a product of his environment. And now all these years later, he stole some cigarettes and is starving in prison, with no medical care – and no way out.”

Name: Joseph Palmer

Sentence: Aggregate term of imprisonment for not less than 2 years, not more than 5 years

Offense: Burglary (felony)

Priors: Miscellaneous burglaries, petty theft, possession of marijuana

Year sentenced: 2019

Age at sentencing: 58

Projected release date: Unknown