

Michigan Lifers Association, Inc. and National Lifers of America, Inc.

MICHIGAN

Lifers Report

Newsletter

SEPTEMBER 2023

RELEASE OUR ELDERLY PRISONERS

EXCESSIVE CONFINEMENT EQUALS MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Willis X. Harris

Research shows that nearly a quarter of state prisoners are suffering from/with mental health problems due to excessive incarceration. Prisoners who have been confined 20 years or more are losing contact with time, places, situations, and reality. The longer the confinement, the more intense the illness.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 43% of state prisoners reported symptoms that met the criteria for mania; about 23% had symptoms of major depression; and 15% met the criteria for a psychotic disorder.

The report also states that nearly one-fourth of state prisoners who had a mental health problem did not compare to those without with those who had served 3 or more prior incarcerations.

Further, female prisoners had higher rates of mental health problems than males--73% females and 55% males.

By most serious offense, excluding prisoners sentenced to life or death, both violent state prisoners who had a mental health problem and those without had about the same mean sentence length. Violent state prisoners who had a mental health problem were sentenced to serve a mean maximum sentence length of 212 months and those without, 211 months.

Among prisoners sentenced to life or death, there was little variation in sentence length by mental health status. About 8% of state prisoners who had a mental health problem ... (Cont. on p. 3)

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**MICHIGANS LIFERS REPORT
NEWSLETTER**

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(Limit articles to 600 words)

WHY KEEP THE OLD AND SICK BEHIND BARS?

By The Editorial Board
The New York Times

Anyone who visits a prison these days might be shocked to see what looks more like a nursing home with bars and metal detectors. Prisoners put away years ago under the wave of draconian sentencing are now turning gray and frail, suffering from heart disease and hypertension and feeling the effects of Alzheimer's and other age-related illnesses.

Corrections officials once thought they had time to prepare for this, but something unexpected happened. Federal data shows that prison inmates are more rapidly than people on the outside--because of stress, poor diet and lack of medical care--so much so that their infirmities qualify them as "elderly" at the age of 50.

This problem is overwhelming the state and federal prison systems ability to manage it. And unless prisons adopt a common-sense approach of releasing older inmates who present no danger to the public, this costly group could soon account for a full third of the population behind bars.

Granting early release to sick, elderly inmates with families who want to care for them would be the humane thing to do. But it also makes good policy sense, given that they are far less likely than the young to commit new crimes. For example, a 2012 study by the American Civil Liberties Union documented that criminal activity drops sharply as people age. In New York, the study found just 4 percent of prisoners 65 or older return to prison with a new conviction within three years of release; only 7 percent of those who are 50 to 64 do so. In contrast, 16 percent of those 49 or younger return.

A 2015 report on the federal prison system published by the Justice Department's Office of The Inspector General offers a sense of what managing aging inmates will cost if compassionate release programs aren't expanded. Older prisoners are already more expensive than younger ones; treating the sick is more costly in prisons. The costs will grow as prisons are forced to hire more and more people to help elderly inmates feed, bathe, and dress themselves or to escort them on trips to see medical specialists. Some elderly inmates will also require costly infrastructure improvement, like elevators and wheelchair-accessible cells, bathrooms and passageways.

The Inspector General's report also found that the re-arrest rate for older inmates was relatively low compared with the rate for young inmates and said that many older inmates were good candidates for early release. But federal policies "limit the number of aging inmates who can be considered for early release and, as a result, few are actually ... (Cont. on p. 7)

(Release Our Elderly Prisoners, from p. 1) ... and 9% of those without were sentenced to life or death. Among federal prisoners, 3% of both those who had a mental health problem and those without were sentenced to life or death.

The Phoenix study on psychiatric disorders among lifers and the elderly shows that prolonged incarceration alters the thinking and views of these men and women, especially females. The longer the period of imprisonment, the greater the degree of mental deterioration. Some believe there is no hope for release consideration and begin to develop bipolar depression while other become frightened of the possibility of death.

Both CURE Life-Long, Inc. and the Michigan Lifers Association, Inc. have written to the American Correctional Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the Michigan Legislature, the Michigan Department of Corrections, and both former Governor Rick Snyder and current Governor Gretchen Whitmer about the psychological effects on prisoners from excessive incarceration asking for immediate changes in policies and state laws concerning issues raised in this article. We have been calling and writing since 2016. No responses!

It seems that the policies in Michigan and across the nation are life-means-life, no interest, and time-for-crime. Rehabilitation and release of our elderly lifers play no role in their policies and thinking.

Taxpayers pay nearly \$2.5 billion annually for the rehabilitation, medical, and mental health care of all prisoners. All of these priorities seem to be placed on shelves or on the low priority list.

As in most states, lifers, especially LWOP lifers, cannot be rehabilitated according to state parole boards.

In spite of overwhelming evidence that lifers--with and without parole eligibility--are the best parole risk of any class or group of prisoners. Our elderly prisoners suffering of delusion, paranoia, and loss of reality can be redeemed if released to group homes or convalescent centers where they can receive corrective therapy and real psychiatric/psychological evaluation, medication, and treatment.

Nationwide, nearly \$60 billion dollars annually are spent on our criminal justice system with little to no returns for taxpayers' investments.

Prisons are no safeguards for society. Recidivism and new commitments reveal that the core problem or cause is in society. Mental illness has both social and political causes. These factors place both pressure and undue stress on individuals, especially our lower economic class, accompanied with alcohol and drug use.

To conclude, let us reform our elderly prisoners and release them. We have nearly 100,000 senior citizens incarcerated. Governors should release them now!

SOURCES

James, Doris J. & Glaze, Lauren E. (Sept. 2019). Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCJ 213600.

Blumberg, Robery. (2019). Phoenix Study on Psychiatric Disorders Among Lifers and the Elderly. The Rising Press Publishing Company. Pgs. 12-18.

SUPPORT SUPPORT SUPPORT SUPPORT SUPPORT SUPPORT SUPPORT

SECOND LOOK SENTENCING SECOND LOOK SENTENCING

ENDING JLWOP ENDING JLWOP ENDING JLWOP ENDING JLWOP

GOOD TIME GOOD TIME GOOD TIME GOOD TIME GOOD TIME

BENEFITS OF AN INTEGRATED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH MODEL FOR LATINOS AND OTHER MINORITY POPULATIONS IN CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Adriana Pena, MA
Sarah Shelton, PsyD, MPH, MSCP

Due to disproportional minority confinement and mass incarceration, racial and ethnic minorities have become a large proportion of correctional populations across the United States. Latinos, specifically, make up 34% of the federal prison population and are one of the fastest growing prison populations (BOP Prison Count, 2016). There is also concern that ethnic minorities are underserved in correctional environments (Biswanger et al., 2012; Harwell, 2001).

Minority inmates face numerous barriers to physical and mental healthcare access that may be eased through the integrated behavioral health model. For many inmates from marginalized groups, the healthcare services obtained while incarcerated may represent their only substantial contact with healthcare providers. Therefore, incorporating behavioral health providers and services into routine correctional healthcare systems is critical to ensure that mental health concerns are assessed and addressed.

For Latinos specifically, there are lower rates of healthcare utilization and lower rates of health insurance (Manoleas, 2008). This lack of access to healthcare services is surely magnified even further for individuals who are marginalized due to multiple intersecting minority identities. In correctional settings, mental health stigma, language barriers, and cultural distance may limit Latinos and other minorities from seeking services (Hartwell, 2001). These barriers have created tremendous limitations in access to care and further contributed to health disparities.

Within correctional settings, there may also be a sense of alienations, isolation, and lack of social support for minority populations. Providing integrated healthcare services can help meet some of these needs and reduce the barriers to care by providing one comprehensive service which meets multiple health needs simultaneously. Also, Latinos often experience psychological distress through somatic complaints which can complicate their clinical presentation (Tofoli et al., 2011). Allowing physical and mental health providers to work together to conceptualize their physical health, mental health, and criminogenic risk/need areas could improve outcomes.

One known contributor to recidivism of criminal conduct is the lack of access to appropriate behavioral and physical healthcare (Wallace & Papachristos, 2014). Some studies have shown that facilitating relationships between minority inmates and both healthcare and mental healthcare professionals during incarceration correlates with lower recidivism rates after release (Patel et al., 2014; Vigilante et al., 1997). By providing integrative services to Latinos and other ethnic/racial minorities, it may reduce their recidivism rates which, in turn, could help reduce the immense problem of disproportionate minority confinement that plagues us today.

While there is evidence to suggest that integrated behavioral health may decrease mental health disparities among Latinos and other minorities, and that elements of the integrated behavioral health model contribute to reduced recidivism rates, further research is necessary to explore the impact of integrated behavioral health on incarcerated Latinos and other minority populations. However, it seems only logical that employing integrated behavioral health models in correctional environments would benefit inmates with less access to care, minority stress, and other layers of marginalization while simultaneously reducing the risk of ... (Cont. on p. 7)

IS AMERICA THE REAL DYING COLONIALISM?

Titus Yahaweh

We are living in an era of uncertainty. We don't know what is on the horizon and what awaits us as human beings. But we do know and see what we are facing and experiencing today--a period of shame, suffering, sorrow, and death caused by mental illness, out-of-control violent crimes, deadly diseases, extreme racism, bigotry, sexism, taking away women's rights to control their own bodies, and gross denial of equal freedom, justice, and equality for all people.

Our politicians have made the Statue of Liberty a demon and a staged joke. We claim to believe in God, but perform like a nation of devout sinners and overt hypocrites.

Reflecting on the tragedies of the previous years, I was brought to tears: George Floyd's murder, Breanna Taylor, the jogger in Georgia, the two black men murdered in Minnesota, and the four school children murdered in Michigan at Oxford High School in Oxford Township. I am still hurt and shedding tears while writing this article.

I didn't forget the five others, including a teacher recovering from their gunshot wounds by a deranged 15-year-old student whose irresponsible parents purchased their son a deadly weapon and ammunition to please him for a birthday gift.

This massacre was preceded in Wisconsin by another deranged 15-year-old kid, Kyle Rittenhouse, armed to-the-teeth with an AK-47, who traveled from another state, shot and murdered two innocent people found not guilty in court.

Look at the policewoman in Minnesota who shot and killed an unarmed young black man and lied and said she thought she had her taser. Being a cop for 26 years not knowing by color and weight the difference between her pistol and taser.

In our criminal justice system today, black lives have been devalued and are sub-

ject to any injustices deemed necessary. They can be arrested, falsely accused, being innocent, still tried in court, convicted and sentenced to prison for the rest of their lives.

To avoid any misunderstanding, racism isn't bad; it only means that one loves and prefers his/her ethnic group over another. However, prejudice means forming and finalizing opinion in advance to actual knowing, with the opinion subject to change upon being fully informed. To quote one of your writer's and president of the Michigan Lifers Association, Willis X. Harris. Hate results from complex or inferior view of oneself against the status and rise of another person or people.

No person or group of people, irrespective of color, can rise above the status or condition of his-her own ethnic group or populace.

America is besieged with criminal minds, racism, mental illness, mass incarceration of innocent men and women, and injustices on all front and may be under divine chastisement.

Help us change before it is too late.

EDITOR'S NOTE: While I agree with the premise of Titus Yahaweh's article, I must openly admit some facts are inaccurate. I also do not see injustices occurring only do to some form of "-ism" that we commonly hear in mainstream news media. An injustice is an injustice regardless of whether an "-ism" is attached to it.

CONSIDER THIS: PRISONERS DONATING ORGANS TO GET TIME OFF RAISES THORNY ETHICAL QUESTIONS

Austin Sarat, Amherst College
(Partial Report)

In January 2023 two Democratic Representatives, Judith Garcia and Carlos Gonzalez, proposed a bill that would offer prisoners in Massachusetts a new way to win reduction in their sentences by donating their bone marrow or vital organs.

The bill stated that the commissioner of the department of corrections should establish both a bone ... (Cont. on p. 7)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Re: Placement For People With Sex Offense Convictions

By Kathie, Michigan Citizens for Justice

In the May 2023 issue of the Michigan Lifers Report Newsletter Willis X. Harris wrote an article exploring whether people who commit a sexual offense are mentally ill or not and thus how they should be treated after their offense. He shared disturbing stories of some violent sex offenses, one committed by a recidivist. Fortunately, violent sex assaults by strangers are the exception when talking about sex crimes, and the recidivism rate for people convicted of sex offenses is one of the lowest of all crime types¹. As to whether sex offenders have a mental disorder, there are all kinds of sex offenses and all kinds of people who commit them. They cannot be lumped together.

Here are some of the variety of crimes that are called sexual in Michigan: two teenage lovers engage in inappropriate touching or intercourse, children explore each other sexually, a developmentally disabled person is attracted to younger people who have a mental maturity similar to his or her own and acts inappropriately, a homeless person urinates in public more than once, a person views pictures or videos of sexual acts committed by someone under 18, a person under 18 takes a naked photo of their self and sends it to their boyfriend, a person appears after being encouraged by an undercover police officer in a sting to meet and have sex with a nonexistent underage teenager, a husband forces his wife to have sex with him, two college students have sex but are too inebriated to consent, a stranger grabs someone and rapes them, a schizophrenic hears god's voice telling him to populate the world with his/her offspring and then tries to do that.

As for any crime, the response to a sexual crime should focus on repairing the harm and preventing future crimes. There is no one answer for all sex crimes. Psychologists know how to do risk assessments as to how likely someone is to re-offend sexually, and they should be involved in choosing an appropriate response.

Here are some facts, the knowledge of which may reduce the fear and aversion people sometimes have when thinking about sex crimes, and can also help decision makers craft better policy.

- The likelihood of people convicted of a sex offense to commit another sex offense is relatively low.¹ The only other crime type that has a lower recidivism rate is murder.
- Therapy can be helpful², but it needs to be the right kind for each person and not everyone needs it.
- The longer a convicted person goes without committing another sexual offense, the lower their risk is of doing so. By 15-20 years post-incarceration, if there has not been another sexual conviction, even the people judged highest risk at the time of their conviction are no more likely to commit a sexual offense than those in the control group (other ex-convicts).³
- More than 90% of sex crimes against children are committed by someone known to the victim, e.g. a family member, teacher or coach, not a stranger.⁴ Therefore worrying predominantly about people on a Registry is misplaced.
- The most common age for committing a sex offense is 14 years ... (Cont. on p. 7)

(Why Keep The Old, from p. 2) ... released early," the report explained. This program is echoed at the state level, where eligibility for compassionate release is so strictly defined that parole boards almost never consider granting it.

Prisons, of course, cannot release people based solely on age. But the states and federal government can expand medical parole programs under which far too few terminally ill and physically disabled people are now released. In addition, parole boards across the country can screen older inmates for release using widely accepted measures to determine whether or not the inmate poses a risk. The best answer for the future is for state legislatures to keep moving away from the disproportionately harsh sentencing laws brought us to this point in the first place.

(Benefits Of An Integrated, from p. 4) ... recidivism and return of minorities into correctional custody. Further, viewing incarceration as an opportunity to assess and treat physical and mental health conditions that disproportionately impact Latinos and other minorities creates an opportunity to improve health outcomes at the individual and public health level in a manner that is also cost-saving.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Sarah Shelton, PsyD, MPH, MSCP operates Shelton Forensic Solutions, LLC at Spalding University Interdisciplinary Behavioral health Scholars Program.

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(Consider This, from p. 5) ... marrow and organ donation that would set eligibility standards for inmates interested in the program. While forbidding commissions or monetary payments for donors, it stated that prisoners could "gain not less than 60 and not more than 365 day reduction in the length of their committed sentence" if they

donated bone marrow or an organ.

The legislators claimed that their proposal would respect the bodily autonomy of incarcerated people by letting them decide what to do with their vital organs. It also would address racial disparities by helping to expand the pool of donors.

Recently, however, Garcia and Gonzalez have walked back their proposal and are planning to introduce a version without the promise of a sentence reduction.

Still, the idea of giving sentence reductions in return for organ donation raises serious ethical issues. As someone who has studied punishment and imprisonment, including the conditions of confinement in American prisons, I'm aware that some states have allowed prisoners to donate organs without any external incentives. But the question is whether prison inmates can ever consent freely to organ donation.

SOURCE: Detroit Legal News, Thursday, February 16, 2023, p. 3.

(Letter To The Editor, from p. 6) ... old.⁵

Let's make policy based on facts, not anecdotes, myths, or unfounded fears.

1 Maynard Law Office, 2019, <https://narsol.org/2019/05/new-study-shows-sexual-offense-recidivism-rates-lower-than-previous-estimates/>

2 Marshall, William, *Effective Psychological Treatment of Adult Male Sexual Offenders*, 2021, <https://narsol.psychopen.eu/index.php/sotrap/article/view/7473/7473.html>

3 <https://narsol.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/A-Better-Path-to-Community-Safety-NARSOL.pdf>

4 Snyder, Howard, *Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics*, 2000, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/saycrle.pdf>

5 <https://reason.com/2016/07/26/the-most-likely-age-of-sex-offenders-the/#:~:text=But%20in%20fact%2C%20the%20most,the%20U.S.%20Bureau%20of%20Justice.>

BIOGRAPHY: Kathie is a retired community college instructor and long-time criminal justice reform advocate. She is active in Michigan Citizens for Justice, a support and advocacy ... (Cont. on p. 8)

(Letter To The editor, from p. 7) ...
group for people convicted of a sex offense, their
family and friends.

NLA SPONSORS VISIT CHAPTER 1014

Sybil Padgett, NLA National Board

On June 24, 2023, Pete Martel, Program Coordinator, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), visited NLA Local Chapter 1014 at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility in Ypsilanti, Michigan. All prison-based organizations must be sponsored by an external group/organization and approved by the CFA Deputy Director to function within an institution (P.D. 05.03.100).

For many years, AFSC has sponsored the NLA to promote social, educational, and cultural purposes. We are grateful for the positive impact AFSC has had on prisoners' lives and the hard work they do in criminal legal reform in Michigan.

We had a great turnout with each of our Chapter's committees providing a brief summary of the advocacy work they are doing to bring about criminal legal reform from the inside. Pete informed us of the continued work AFSC is doing concerning the commutation applications that have been sent to them for their assistance.

Pete stressed the importance of prisoners sharing their stories with each other for better understanding.

We discussed the Second Look Sentencing Legislation (SB 321-325; HB 4556-4560) and how to write and speak to those legislators who may oppose it.

In addition, Pete briefed us on the progress of the historical project "Women Serving Life Sentences in Michigan" that he is working on with Professor Heather Ann Thompson and her students from the University of Michigan. Pete thanked all the women lifers for their prompt responses to his questions he emailed us for the project.

The meeting ended with an open forum of questions and answers concerning the continued work AFSC is doing in Michigan.

Families and friends can join our

sponsor at www.prisonadvocacy.org.

TO OUR READERS & SUPPORTERS

We at NLA Local Chapter 1014 would like to thank all who are helping and who have helped bring together people in support of the Second Look Sentencing (SB 321-325; HB 4556-4560), Good Time (HB 4468-4471), and Ending JLOWP (SB 119-123; HB 4160-4164) legislation.

The numerous rallies and town-hall meetings throughout Michigan have brought awareness to these bills, provided information to the uninformed, and garnered support.

Although concern has been voiced by those who oppose these bills, that it will open a floodgate releasing thousands of prisoners, we must continue to educate people on the facts, countering the political rhetoric of public safety concerns.

The Second Look Sentencing Legislation will not open a floodgate releasing thousands of prisoners. The fact is Second Look Sentencing has a stringent process that must be met before a judge will even consider a reduction in sentence. Even if a judge chooses to re-sentence an individual, they still have to see the Parole Board and possibly have a psychological evaluation before they are released into society. So if the Parole Board decides they need more programming before release, they can defer parole until the required programming is completed. Many safeguards are in the bill to assure public safety is priority number one when deciding whether an individual should have his or her sentence reduced.

The women of NLA Local Chapter 1014 are sharing their stories before and during incarceration and the steps they took to rehabilitate and educate themselves without the support of corrections. Listen to their life experiences.

You can support Second Look Sentencing Legislation by contacting your State Senator and Representative and ask them to support the bill and vote yes in its passage. Also, contact Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel at miag@michigan.gov and tell her you support this bill and want it passed in Michigan. In addition, support Second Look Sentencing by signing a petition at <https://linktr.ee/secondlook.mi>.

Sybil Padgett
NLA National Board of Directors

National Lifers of America, Inc.



Chapter 1014 • Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility • 3201 Bemis Road • Ypsilanti, MI
48197-0911

SUMMER 2023

"Empowering Incarcerated Women Toward Reform & Release"

GREETINGS!!!

From the entire NLA Chapter 1014 membership....We are honored to submit to you the Summer 2023 edition of the National Lifers of America, Inc. Chapter 1014 Newsletter

Tina Martin and Christina Sears, NLA Newsletter Committee

"Even when we are kept apart, we are all still together, and when we come back together, we refuse to be broken apart"
-Anita Coomer, NLA President, Chapter 1014

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READY, SET, GO!

by Sybil Padgett

The National Lifers of America (NLA), Inc, Chapter 1014 at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility has reconvened after the three year COVID-induced pause. Together with the NLA president, Anita Coomer, we have established the following committees for Chapter 1014 and agendas.

This year, each committee has been assigned a bill to support, track its progress in the legislature and keep NLA members informed of its status, particularly if it passes as described below.

1. Sentencing Reform

- Productivity credits (Ref: HB6567-6568)
- Second Look (Draft #3 by Senator Jeff Irwin)

2. *Lifer Legislation/Aiding and Abetting*
 - The Effective Prison Reform Act (proposed by Dwight, NLA)
 - Reform Michigan Aiding and Abetting Statute (proposed by David, NLA)
 - Proposal with Michigan Lifers Association
 - Prison voting policy (Ref HB 5336)
3. *Raise the Age/Youthful Offender*
 - The Adolescent Redemptive and Restorative Project
 - Emergence Justice (Second Look)
 - Juvenile LWOP Policy (Ref: SB825, SB848-851)
4. *Domestic Violence/Battered Women's Clemency Project*
 - Women's Prison Oversight Committee Policy (Ref: SB487)

5. *Medical Compassionate Release/Prison Health Care*
 - Reestablish Michigan's Parole Commutation/Clemency Unity
 - Compassionate release for lifers >50 years of age and with >20 years of incarceration
 - Phone call cost policy (Ref: Bill #)
 - Police reform policy (Ref: SB473-484)
6. *Actual Innocence/Wrongful Convictions*
 - Restorative Justice Policy (Ref: HB5340)

Our local board consists of the following elected officers: President, Vice-President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary (Ways and Means). Our appointed officers include: Sergeant of Arms, Orientation, Activation, Retention, Internal Administrator, External Administrator and Legal Research and Editors.

The President and I are passionate about seeing positive results of our advocacy work. Our agenda supports enhancement of social, educational and cultural goals for prisoners. The work of the NLA benefits us all!

MY EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY BEHIND THE WALLS

by LaChanté N Mobley

My journey with education in prison first began in 2004. I reported to my mandatory first day of GED class. After having a conversation with my teacher, she let me know that I did not need to attend the GED class while waiting for verification of my high school diploma. She asked me what career technical educational class I was interested in, and I was subsequently placed on the waiting list for the Food Service and Hospitality Management class.

Within a few months, I was able to enroll in this class. My instructor and tutors treated our class well as a whole, and I enjoyed our classroom setting. My goal became to be a tutor in the Food Service and Hospitality Management class.

I met with a huge obstacle in 2006, however, while working toward that goal, as those of us serving life sentences were removed from career technical education classes. I only had about 10 chapters remaining to complete the class and I found out about this policy change while out of class due to a hand injury. Even with my injury, I had tried my best to do as much of the homework as possible. In the end, I was unable to meet the requirements for class completion. I was disappointed and let go of my goal...temporarily.

Fast-forwarding my first educational journey to 2015, when I was working as a clerk in the school office, I renewed my classification programming to remain on the waiting list for the class that I had started. Months later, when I was able to re-enroll, I found that the requirements for class completion had changed! But after meeting the revised and additional requirements, I met with the same opposition again, affecting women serving life sentences. Since I was now closer to obtaining my goal, I fought back. I filed a grievance. In my mind, I could not understand why I would be unable to complete the class so that I could have a meaningful job in my current community. Moreover, the policy at that time stated that those serving life sentences should be removed from adult basic education but not career technical education classes.

As a result of the grievance process, I was able to complete the class and participate in the graduation ceremony in 2017. Later, I was interviewed and then received an offer for a tutor position in the Food Service and Hospitality Management class. I gladly accepted the offer the same day! Although the class is no longer classified as a career technical education class, I am blessed to maintain this position five and a half years later as part of the Vocational Village.

LIFER

by Susan Bardo

Losing
Interest
For
Everyday
Reality

Loving
Individual
Facing
Eternal
Rejection

Letting
Indignity
Form
Emotional
Reactions

Longing
Inside
For
Equal
Respect

FIGHTING AS A WAY OF LIFE

by Krista Gladney

My great-grandmother used to say, "Any animal backed into a corner will come out fighting." I remember looking at her watch the Discovery Channel, featuring native aquatic wildlife in some foreign land. Grandma used to stare at the TV with the awe and amazement of a child and say, "Wow, Kris, even the fish fight!"

It is just the way it was. Nobody ever questioned if it was the way it was supposed to be. It was the life that everyone in my clan knew.

My mother, with her 5 foot 4 inch stature, would climb on top of a table with the prowess of a jaguar and jump with arms flying and scratching onto my father, who stood at 6 foot 7 inches. Fear was not an option; only survival was. And to survive, you had to fight.

My dad had a girlfriend who used to whip my brother and me in the bathtub with an extension cord. When we told daddy, he picked up the dustpan and beat the lady, with my brother and me sitting on the couch, until only the handle remained. Fighting was a form of communication. It had to be, or why else did you get hit on your mouth when you got sassy?

It is what I learned and what I understood. Education, work, procreation and fight. It was a thing as American as apple pie.

Although humans do not frame fighting in this way, it was essentially a mechanism for survival. The problem is when God gave us the directive to "subdue and dominate," he was not talking about each other. But that message has been lost in vying to live and thrive. Respectability is not predicated by the ability to dominate. Submission is not reverence and has no place in a union between man and woman.

We fight enemies, not loved ones. We fight for a common goal or purpose, not to make someone do what you say. The minute a partner employs violence, the couple is no longer cohesive.

Ladies, recognize what you realize, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. He who is not with me is against me and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad".

It is just that simple. Stop holding to a hope that does not exist. Violence is not love. It is a manifestation of hate. I pray that you take heed before you find yourself as I did, fighting for your life.

WE LOVE YOU, MOM

by Karen Boler

I have been incarcerated for 30 years. I am the mother of 3 sons who were very young at the time of my incarceration. As a mother, it has been extremely hard to be separated from my children.

My children did not understand why I was gone and when I would come home. My parents became their parents, and I am forever grateful to them. I always told them "thank you", yet, I felt it was not enough.

Now, 30 years later, I am proud of my sons and the men they have become. I have 7 precious grandchildren, 3 daughters-in-law, and a smile on my face!

My children are old enough to know "why" and they make sure to let me know, "Mom, we love you."

JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

by Ashley Swartout

It is with pleasure that I write about the great warm welcome that I experience at NLA meetings, where we gather to create a community that is focused on advocacy and share news with other members. NLA members are respectful and encouraging, helpful in times of need, and supportive in every way that they are able.

We support each other on our journey to freedom and to be treated fairly. We all made mistakes along the way. But we do not want to continue to make mistakes. We women have taken the time to learn and rehabilitate ourselves and have helped others reach their goals along the way.

I see women every day who have the opportunity to roll out of bed and say "I quit" and not do anything productive with themselves. But many motivated women keep moving, holding one, two and sometimes three jobs in addition to involvement in groups, programs and school, and then coming together to praise God in song, dance and worship on their tired feet. They engage in this work every week, just praying for a second chance at life as they grow spiritually, mentally and emotionally and learn to be mature and responsible citizens.

The women come in having faith and will power to fight for their lives, for redemption, and for being paid for their hard labor every day. Not all the groups and programs are forced through court orders. Many women make the effort to take every class or program that is offered, just to better themselves,

gaining skills while trying their hardest to remain "ticket-free" of any more trouble.

I believe that every woman should have the opportunity to demonstrate her growth through "Second Look". While the parole board and courts may see some of the efforts that an inmate has put into being a productive member, they do not necessarily see the mental, emotional and even spiritual growth that comes along with it. This is where the NLA perspective and involvement are important. The NLA gives women the chance to be heard, taken care of, and share success stories of rehabilitation towards being responsible and mature citizens while working on common advocacy goals. Time does not guarantee change. Rather, change is defined by how motivated you are to achieve it.

"Opposition is an opportunity to show strength of character." So keep coming together, ladies. We got this.

LETTERS TO MICHIGAN LEGISLATORS ABOUT THE GOOD TIME BILL

I have been in prison for 7 years now. What does good time mean to me? It is a second chance on life and an opportunity to change my ways of thinking as I learn mentally and emotionally to move forward with a fresh start. I miss going outdoors with my family, and planning vacations together. I do not like having to waste more years in this place. The days in my cell help me realize what I want most in my life; i.e. freedom. Reinstating the Good Time bill will have a big impact, not just for me but for all of us who would be grateful to have a second chance. Thank you so much!

-Melissa Day

I have been incarcerated at the Women's Huron Valley for 1 year, 7 months and 28 days. I have had 0 infractions since I started serving my time here. I would like to see an incentive program reinstated for prisoners such as myself who stay out of trouble and are ticket free, attend their classes, appointments and work, to go home. I am asking for your support in passing into law, House Bill 6568 for "Good Time". This bill would give us hope, encouragement and, I believe, will contribute to reducing the suicide rate in prisons statewide.

I would also like to be the voice for inmates who cannot speak for themselves. They are the ones who are in infirmaries, acute units and less fortunate housing. They are not forgotten, and this request is from them as well.

When I am granted good time, I will continue to seek counseling through the VA. Once I am released, I will attend church regularly and get the needed health care that I am so lacking at the WHV.

I pray that you will pass House Bill 6568 into law. Thank you so much!

-Michelle Jessup

LETTERS TO MICHIGAN LEGISLATORS ABOUT THE SECOND LOOK BILL

I am not coming to you as a number, not as a convicted felon, not as an inmate or a prisoner. I am coming to you as the mother of three kings whom I had to raise to the best of my ability from inside these gates, through phone calls, visits, letters and cards.

The Second Look legislation would mean so much to me because it would give me the opportunity to show society that I am remorseful, changed, wiser, and improved. These changes were choices that I made without incentive, without an audience, without a pat on my back and without hey, a good job. Instead, they were made with total motivation for wanting to be better, not just for myself but for my sons, my family and for society. I made these changes despite the constant reminder that within these walls, I am a number first and a human being second.

I am not saying that I am perfect because I do not have a perfect record. But I am not who I once was, and that is my motivation to keep pushing forward. I am grateful that there are some people out there who look at us and feel that we deserve a second chance at life.

We have fallen down and we have chosen to get back up to continue the never-ending fight for our freedom. I appreciate everyone who is in this fight with us and lifts us up when we fall down, because we need you.

-Felicia Hale

I have never been optimistic-accepting things for what they are, my sentence for starters. I never had hope or belief that I would ever exit this prison before 2041-that is, until the day that I decided to actually listen and focus on what NLA members were saying. It was then that I realized that I could hope and believe that I could go home sooner than my earliest release date. I was hesitant to relay information about the Second Look bill to my family out of fear. I didn't want to keep hurting them. Eventually, however, I filled them in and was amazed by how they responded. When I found that my family and friends eagerly educated themselves about this bill, my eyes were opened to the love and support that

surrounds me. The Second Look bill also impacted my own behavior. I finally found an incentive to do/be good. I realized that I needed to stop wasting time and to focus on becoming a great candidate for release.

Second Look means many things to me. It means that I might have a fair shot at coming home, a chance to hug my family one more time. It is a chance to have a real life, a true purpose. It is an opportunity to show that the mistake I made when I was a 17-year-old does not define who I am. It is also an opportunity to express my remorse and to work hard every day to be a good and kind person.

- *Felecia McCarty*

What the Second Look bill means to me is that it is a way for my voice to be heard about mitigating factors that were ignored, avoided and suppressed at every stage of my case and to be re-sentenced appropriately.

The Second Look bill is a huge stepping stone on the path to change in a broken system and Godsent for family reunification. Caging and controlling people does not make everyone safe. The Second Look bill provides hope and positivity to people who want to change for the better and be able to go home.

Taxpayer dollars could be more wisely spent on preventive educational programs instead of housing over-sentenced people. It is not good policy to be paying for hospice, cancer, dialysis and diabetic treatments for inmates who have been incarcerated for 30, 40 even 50 years!

Please give Second Look a chance for bringing about real change and success.

-*Carla Cole*

CHOICES

by Tina Martin

Like everything in life, prison and rehabilitation within it depends on choice. A choice that we need to make at the lowest point in our life, a time when we feel alone and hopeless. You can choose to fall into the norm of everyday life in prison or choose to believe that you are still worth it. And believe it or not, you can use this life-altering experience to find the good, no, the best in you! For this, you have to find inner strength. Nothing in God's world is a mistake.

Hard choices are not easy. We tend to get caught up in everyday life in prison. So make a choice: easy/hard? Which one is it going to be? Which one benefits us in the long run? The possibility for change is everywhere. However, we have to grasp it in order

to achieve it. Having made a choice, we have to believe in it and live it. There are real success stories in and outside these walls.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY

by Angela Fisher

After more than a decade of being incarcerated, I was blessed to meet a staff member who began to instill in me that I am still a human with worth and value, and that my past does not define me nor my future. At that time, I had been practicing Hatha yoga for several years. I began to look deeply inside myself and my past, and found in my heart, a desire to find a way for incarcerated women to give back to our community. Thus, the Walk-a-Thon was created in 2007.

With the administrative assistance of Deputy Robin Cole, Robert Scott Correctional Facility held its first Breast Cancer Walk-a-thon. With a population of approximately 800 residents, we raised just over \$200 for the Susan G. Komen Foundation. I was so proud of each lady who participated in that first walk. I recall it was a chilly October when someone in the control center announced "yard is open". The ladies came out into the prison yard, signed in at a registration table, received a pink ribbon, and filled out a disbursement form (if they chose) in a show of support for helping bring awareness to breast cancer and raise funds needed for research to save lives. As women began to walk lap after lap around the track that encircled the prison yard, the razor wire fences seemed to fade away, and all I saw were women honoring and remembering someone they had lost to cancer or celebrating someone who had beaten the ugly monster. This event united the women in a way that I had never witnessed before. I knew from that first walk that I would continue to organize walks and raise money for research for the rest of my life.

In 2009, the Robert Scott and Women's Huron Valley facilities merged under a new warden. At that time, I had no idea how close cancer would come to me. In 2010, after only 12 short months, my mother lost her battle with cancer. Although it would be another two years before we could organize the next walk-a-thon, but wow, did the women show up! That year, we raised almost \$1500! I know that the women cared and wanted to make a difference. We all just needed an outlet. We have continued this event over the years. When the world locked down for COVID in 2020, the walk was placed on hold. However, donations were still collected and forward to the

Susan G. Komen Foundation for breast cancer research.

The average prisoner earns less than a dollar a day. Still, my peers have no problem in making the sacrifice for the greater good of giving back. It is not the exceptional prisoner who comes out to the yard on cold, sometimes rainy October days. Rather, it is the average woman here, almost every woman.

I share these memories with you in hopes of changing the narrative of prison and inmates. I want citizens in Michigan to know that the women at WHV care and that we put our hard earned pennies where our mouths are. We stand together to fight cancer, to raise funds to one day find a cure for a disease that has claimed the lives of our loved ones. We are women who have made unchangeable, tragic choices who are working on ourselves to become better people than the ones who entered the facility. Yes, we are incarcerated women, but we are human and we care, we love, and we want to help end cancer in our lifetime.

The breast cancer walk-a-thon has paved the way for other such events at WHV. We also have the annual Domestic Violence walk, which raises awareness of this deadly epidemic and funds local shelters for battered women. We have also held a walk to raise awareness of and funds for human trafficking. Both were huge successes.

As I write this article, I am nearly three decades into a life sentence. Whether or not I am ever released, I will continue to praise God and raise funds until there is a cure for cancer. I am blessed to have witnessed not only the growth of the walk-a-thon, but also the growth in many of the women who support it. To all the ladies who stand with me, walk with me and remember with me, I say thank you and I see you.

WHO AM I TODAY?

by Retta Huggins

Today, I am a strong-minded woman. I can stand and walk alone if need be. I care for others and defend them. I am a woman who acknowledges her feelings, emotions and weaknesses and who strives to be kinder, more understanding and self-loving. In order to love others, you must love yourself first. I open myself up to trusting others and do not close myself off when that trust is broken.

Now let me tell you who I was. I was an angry girl who loved no one, trusted no one, and attacked everyone before they attacked me. I enclosed my inner self in a fortress to keep myself safe from hurt, harm, misuse and pain of any kind.

A DAY IN MY LIFE

by Donnell Miracle

5:00 am rolls around and it is the start of my day. It's time for a shower and a time to give thanks to God

At 6:30 am, if the walks are open, I leave for work at the MSI Dental lab. This job is a saving grace for me; it helps me feel semi-normal. I feel like I have accomplished something in a day, and it helps me be independent.

At 2:50 pm, I leave work and back at my unit, check to see if I have a Prisoner Observation Aide assignment. If I do, I leave my unit around 3:15 pm to report to where I am scheduled to be, watch, and try to help for the next 3 hours. Around 6:30 pm I return to my unit, shower, make a couple of phone calls, check J-Pay, get my laundry together, and if there is time, talk to a friend or two.

At 9:00 pm, it is count down time and a time to relax and then go to sleep.

This is a normal day for me. Some days may include a health care call-out or maybe, a call-out for some other group. I like to stay busy. For me, my days are about being productive.

COMMUTATION = FREEDOM

by Sybil Padgett

Freedom is a gateway to amazing opportunities that most people take for granted. Freedom is about deliverance and being home with loved ones.

In 2022, Governor Gretchen Whitmer commuted the sentences of the following women prisoners: LuAnne Szenay, LaDonna Cummings, Monica McCain and Eboni Speight-giving other lifers hope.

Filing a commutation application, going through a public hearing as a lifer, and then being set free, is a journey through stressful, exhilarating, and then liberating experiences. For anyone who is struggling with their commutation application, just know that freedom and you are worth it!

FEEDBACK ON NLA NEWSLETTERS

Please send us your feedback! We welcome each of you to join the conversation and look forward to hearing from you. Contact **Tina Martin or Christine Sears** at 309 at Women's Huron Valley Correction Facility, 3201 Bemis Road, Ypsilanti, MI 48197 or @JPAY.

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