



Rally Demands Changes to Commutation for Lifers in Pennsylvania

**Protesters Show the Many Costs of
Leaving People to Die in Prison**

Attn: News Desk
For Immediate Release
Press Contact: Bret Grote (412-654-9070)

Harrisburg, PA - On Thursday, August 28th, the Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee and Decarcerate PA will hold a press conference on Thursday, August 28th at noon in the Capitol Rotunda to bring attention to the ways Pennsylvania's Commutation system is broken and proposals for how to improve this system. They will be joined by concerned state residents, lawyers and formerly incarcerated people across the commonwealth to Restore Meaningful Commutation for Lifers in Pennsylvania.

The press conference and rally will begin at noon on August 28th. Earlier that day, there will be a Merit Review Hearing in which the Board of Pardons announces the names of those seeking commutation whose public hearing has been granted, the next step in the commutation process. Avis Lee applied for commutation 3 years ago and activists and supporters believe her name will be called during this hearing.

“Avis Lee has been incarcerated for 34 years. Avis transcribes braille, donates her time to charity, lives on the Honor Block. Imagine what she could do if she were home,” said Suzanne South of the Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee (WTPDC).

When Avis Lee was 18 she was the look-out for a robbery that resulted in death of the victim. Avis didn't pull the trigger, didn't even see it happen, and called an ambulance to try to save the victim's life. Under the Felony Murder Rule she was sentenced to life without parole. If Avis' application is denied this time, she will not have the opportunity to come before the board for another 5 years.

Pennsylvania is one of only six states in the country where people serving life sentences have no possibility of achieving parole. The use of life without parole (LWOP) sentencing in the state has increased steadily over the last several decades, jumping from less than 1,000 people serving LWOP in 1980 to over 5,000 in 2012. At the same time, the use of the commutation process, which is the only

administrative procedure available for lifers to show remorse and suitability for reentry, has drastically decreased. Pennsylvania now has the largest proportion of its prison population serving LWOP sentences in the country (10%).

"It is time we shine a light on the success stories of those that have had a life sentence commuted. They have not simply avoided crime, they have made a difference in their communities as priests, neighborhood center directors, Soros Fellowship recipients, and mentors. The power of mercy has instilled a purpose in these individuals to make amends and to make a difference." says Dr. Brian O'Neill, professor of criminal justice, who will be speaking at the press conference.

Of the nearly 100 lifers in Pennsylvania who were released on parole between 1933 and 2005 aged 50 and above when they were released, only one was sent back to prison for a new crime.

"We need a total overhaul of the commutation process for lifers," said Zoe Mizuho of WTPDC. "We are advocating for a repeal of the unanimous vote requirement for lifers by the Board of Pardons, and streamlining the lengthy and arduous process of applying for commutation."

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