

VOICE-BUFFALO PAPER IN SUPPORT OF THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ERIE COUNTY CONDITIONAL RELEASE COMMISSION

Every county in New York has or can have a local conditional release commission, which has the power to grant eligible prisoners held in its county jail release conditioned on extended supervision by probation officers. Erie County had its own conditional release commission from 1992 to 2005, when it was eliminated in a misguided attempt to save money.

Last year the Erie County Community Corrections Advisory Board, whose members include the superintendent of the Erie County Holding Center, unanimously passed a resolution recommending the Legislature re-establish the commission. It's an excellent recommendation with benefits for county taxpayers, deputies and correctional officers, the mentally ill, veterans, and our community.

By re-establishing the commission, the Legislature can save county taxpayers a very large amount of money. Before the commission was dissolved, about 25 eligible prisoners were released with extended probation each year. One county probation officer with a salary and benefits of \$95,000 a year can supervise all 25. In contrast, it costs county taxpayers \$175 a day to keep each prisoner locked up. That adds up to \$4,375 a day for 25 prisoners. Thus, while conditional release for 25 prisoners costs only \$95,000 a year, their continued imprisonment costs almost \$1.6 million a year (365 x \$4,375). Of course not all this money can be saved because there are fixed costs involved. But the program will save far more than it costs.

Prisoners released into our community conditionally are closely monitored by probation officers for one year, while those released after completing their full sentences are released without supervision. The commission sets conditions for release, which can include employment, and participation in educational or job training programs. Any failure to abide by the conditions can land individuals back in jail for the remainder of their sentence. Completing these requirements maximizes their re-integration and strongly reduces their chance of recidivism. In contrast, prisoners left to complete their full sentence languish in jail where the chances of rehabilitation are slim, but the likelihood they will be exposed to negative influences are great. And once released after serving their full sentence, they are under no obligation to seek help.

Through conditional release the disproportionate number of mentally ill prisoners, including veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, would be able to receive more effective mental health treatment than the criminal justice system can provide them. In 2012, 35% of those incarcerated in our county jails were treated for mental illness. And many young veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are serving time for misconduct that is rooted in PTSD. The criminal justice system is by its nature neither a satisfactory nor cost-efficient place to treat mental illness.

Finally, prisoners are granted conditioned release only after they convince the commission that they will lead law abiding lives, that their release is consistent with the good of our community, and that their release will not deprecate the seriousness of their crime. Thus, only prisoners convicted of relatively minor offenses who have verifiable ties to our community are eligible, while those convicted of any serious crime including crimes of domestic violence are ineligible.

Let's work to reinstate the Erie County Conditional Release Commission because:

- It saves county taxpayers a great deal of money.
- It makes our community safer by placing newly released prisoners under extended probation.
- It opens the way for healthy prisoners to enter job training or employment opportunities as smoothly and quickly as possible.
- It can redirect mentally ill offenders, such as veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, from jail to programs where they can receive effective treatment and supervision. Comm. 12M-8