



*"Faithfully Bringing
Forth Justice"
(Isaiah 43:2)*

VOICE-Buffalo
Clergy & Faith Leaders Caucus

March 17, 2015

Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz
95 Franklin St. 16th Floor
Buffalo, NY 14202

Dear County Executive Poloncarz,

We write in response to the letter that was sent by Probation Commissioner McLaughlin to the County Legislature on March 4th 2015.

While we appreciate the spelling out of the need for the Legislature to pass a County law establishing the Local Conditional Release Commission and its work, we want to express our concern with the suggestion that the existence of the New York State Parole early release program is reason for not moving forward with reinstating the Local Conditional Release Program.

Our research on the NY State Parole Program reveals the following concerns we have with it:

1. In its active years a sum total of zero individuals in Erie County have been granted early release through the State Parole early release program.
2. The program does not provide those who have a previous violation on their record an opportunity to apply.
3. The program does not include individuals with split sentences.
4. There is no comprehensive wraparound service program available to the participants of the state early release program outside of the services that parole provides. These missing services are a critical element to rehabilitating those with mental health, addiction, and other needs.
5. An individual may apply only after serving 45 days, however, it may take up to 6 months before their application is vetted through the state parole office in Albany and an official first response is made. By the time the individual receives a response their sentence term is likely to be approaching its end point.

We strongly believe that the reinstatement of the Local Conditional Release Program is both necessary and urgent for the following reasons:

1. It has a proven history in Erie County of greatly reducing the chances of recidivating for those who participate by providing them with services such mental health and addiction treatment, mentorship, housing and job training.
2. By releasing qualifying individuals early and providing the appropriate resources and support to turn a human life around the Conditional Release Program saves county tax dollars through

the reduction of recidivism and makes our community safer.

3. A locally elected Conditional Release Commission will speed up the process of selecting the appropriate individuals to participate and avoid a state bureaucracy that misses critical opportunities to support those individuals who can benefit tremendously from this program.
4. Unlike the state parole program, which excludes those with prior violations from applying, the Conditional Release Program can greatly benefit those individuals who struggle with mental health and addiction needs who have become entangled in the criminal justice system. We believe many veterans suffering from PTSD and youth who struggle with maturation and addiction issues can be the beneficiaries of this program.
5. Reinstating the Local Conditional Release Program would be a major achievement for the political leadership of Erie County. Both Democrats and Republicans across the nation are addressing the crisis of the mass incarceration of people of color and those with mental health and addiction needs by adopting effective public policy initiatives that offer strong community based alternatives to incarceration.

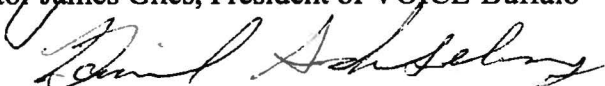
VOICE-Buffalo and the faith community of Buffalo and Erie County strongly believe that each human life is endowed with dignity and worth and that a program such as Local Conditional Release offers the services and support that individuals who struggle require in order to turn their lives around.

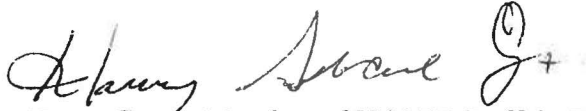
Together we have put a great deal of energy into reinstating the Conditional Release Program. Both Bishop Malone of the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo and Bishop Franklin of the Episcopal Diocese of WNY strongly support reinstating the Conditional Release Program. Bishop Dwight Brown of the WNY Interdenominational Council of Bishops enthusiastically endorses it. The Network of Religious Communities unanimously voted their full support. The Buffalo News Editorial Board has publicly endorsed the reinstatement of the Conditional Release Program, twice. At this point, your office along with both Republicans and Democrats from the Legislature, the Erie County Sheriff's office and the John R. Oishei Foundation have expressed support for reinstating the Conditional Release Program.

We are moving forward with the County Legislature to follow the recommendation you made that the enabling Legislation for the Conditional Release Program be passed with support from the County Attorney's Office and the Department of Law in drafting the local law. We would like to count on your support to ensure that the enabling legislation is passed by the April 30th legislative session. In order to ensure that we are on the same page moving forward we would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience preferably by April 3rd 2015. The opportunity to engage in genuine dialogue would afford us the chance to hear any concerns you may have and to respond to those concerns as best as we can. It also gives us an opportunity to carve out a path forward. We will be in touch with your office to set up this appointment.

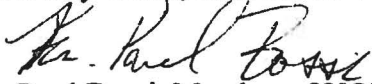
Sincerely,


Pastor James Giles, President of VOICE-Buffalo

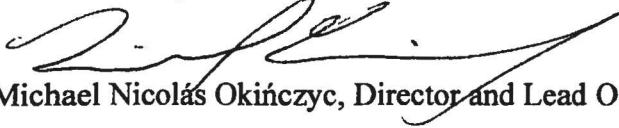

Pastor Dan Schifeling, Member of VOICE-Buffalo Clergy Caucus



Fr. Harry Grace, Member of VOICE-Buffalo Executive Committee



Fr. Paul Bossi, Member of VOICE-Buffalo Executive Committee



Michael Nicolás Okńczyc, Director and Lead Organizer of VOICE-Buffalo

cc: Erie County Legislature Chairman John Mills
Erie County Legislature Majority Leader Joseph Lorigo
Erie County Legislature Minority Leader Betty Jean Grant
Erie County Legislator Edward Rath III
Erie County Legislator Kevin Hardwick
Erie County Legislator Lynne Dixon
Erie County Legislator Barbara Miller-Williams
Erie County Legislator Ted Morton
Erie County Legislator Thomas Loughran
Erie County Legislator Peter Savage III
Erie County Legislator Patrick Burke
Erie County Sheriff Timothy Howard
Erie County Undersheriff Mark Wipperman
Erie County Jail Management Division Superintendent Thomas Diina
Lawrence Cook, John R. Oishei Foundation
Robert Gioia, John R. Oishei Foundation
Erie County Probation Commissioner Brian McLaughlin
Erie County Attorney Michael Siragusa