

Restoring Local Control Over Parole in the District of Columbia

A Community Call for Action <> June 2020

Background

For the past 20 years, the federal United States Parole Commission (USPC) has exercised complete control over local parole decisions in the District. Congressional authorization for the USPC expires in November 2020. Congress's termination of the USPC presents the District with an opportunity to restore local control over parole granting and revocation.

The USPC has been a negative force in the District's criminal justice system. USPC members, who are not District residents or even former residents, decide the fate of DC Code offenders. USPC decisions have extended the incarceration of hundreds of DC residents and send scores of the District's returning citizens back to federal prison every month for non-criminal, technical violations of supervision rules.

COVID-19 and the Need for Immediate Action

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the negative impact of the USPC on the District even more stark. Had a locally-controlled paroling authority, responsive to the community, already been in place, the District could have moved much more quickly to release detainees held in DC jail facilities for alleged parole and supervised release violations. Additionally, working with District officials, a local parole authority could have released hundreds of DC residents from the dangerously mismanaged Hope Village halfway house to safer conditions.

There is broad community support for restoring the District's control over parole. Unfortunately, while the DC Government commissioned a study of the feasibility of restoring its authority over the parole function, the DC Government has yet to announce its intentions to do so or taken concrete steps towards implementation.

Benefits of Local Control

A parole function under the DC Government's jurisdiction would:

- Lead to an overall reduction in incarcerated District residents.
- Eliminate, or significantly decrease, incarceration for non-criminal, technical violations of supervision rules.
- Allow for better coordination with the federally-managed Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), resulting in improvements to how the agency's resources are used to benefit District citizens.
- Create new opportunities to reduce DC Government spending through: (1) direct cost savings entailed in the reduction of locally-incarcerated DC residents; and (2) indirect, long-term savings generated from better coordination between the local parole authority and CSOSA in a way that more effectively ties reentry programs to evidence-based decarceration and restorative justice practices.
- Galvanize ongoing efforts to establish DC Statehood.

Our CALL FOR ACTION

What the DC Government Must Do Right Now

In order to offset the extraordinary demands the COVID-19 crisis has placed upon the Mayor and the DC City Council, reentry advocacy groups and our community partners are prepared to assist the DC Government as it drafts a plan for local control of parole.

However, the primary responsibility for moving this effort forward rests within the DC Government itself.

We therefore call on the DC Government to immediately take the following steps:

- ***The DC Government*** should immediately commit to a plan for the establishment of a DC parole authority, including a clear intention to move forward with this opportunity during the FY 2021 planning process
- ***The DC City Council*** should issue a similar statement of support that expresses its commitment to restoring local control
- ***The Mayor and City Council*** should work together to allocate funding to the FY 2020 supplemental budget and/or the FY 2021 budget for staff resources within the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety to begin the process of establishing the local parole authority
- ***The Mayor and Congresswoman Holmes Norton*** should draft federal legislation that provides full congressional authorization for a local parole authority or that transitions the parole authority from the USPC to a function created by the District.
- ***The City Council***, in particular the Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety and the Committee on Facilities & Procurement, should plan to hold hearings in the fall on legislation establishing the actual structure of the local parole authority
- ***The Mayor and City Council*** should work with reentry advocacy groups throughout this process on a detailed plan for structuring the local parole authority.

Further References

- Reentry Task Force's April 2020 Letter to the DC Government on Restoring Local Control of Parole [[Link](#)]
- The ReThink Justice DC Coalition's March 2020 report on restoring local control of parole [[Exec Summary](#)] [[Full report](#)]
- The Justice Policy Institute's December 2019 Report on Restoring Local Control of Parole [[Exec Summary](#)] [[Full report](#)]
- The District Task Force on Jails & Justice Local Control Committee's November 2019 Phase I Report [[Link](#)]

For Further Information

Isa Mirza, Co-Chair, DC Reentry Task Force – imirza@foleyhoag.com

Louis Sawyer, Co-Chair, DC Reentry Task Force – louis.sawyer.jr@gmail.com