



Background and History of Advocacy for the Return of DC's Parole Function to Local Control

*A report by the ReThink Justice DC Coalition, New Visions Committee
July 2020*

Introduction

The justice system in the District almost exclusively functions under the control of the federal government. The system operates in large part under the jurisdiction of two federal laws: The Home Rule Act of 1973 and the Revitalization Act of 1997. The parole function is one of many justice system components under federal control in the form of the United States Parole Commission (USPC).

Local advocates have been calling for the parole function to be returned to District control for many years. 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 individuals eligible for release on parole or who are alleged to have violated terms of their supervision, including commission of a new crime, following release from prison. 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.

In 2017, many advocates for local control joined together to cooperatively work towards this goal. They organized a public forum on the issue in November 2017 and presented a briefing to the DC City Council in March 2018.

In 2018, Congress reauthorized the USPC for only two years, instead of the five-year terms of previous reauthorizations. The current Congressional authorization for the USPC expires in November 2020. Advocates, hoping to achieve local control of the parole function before the end of this term, held yet another forum on local control, in April 2019.

However, by the start of 2020 it became clear that neither DC Mayor Muriel Bowser nor the Council were going to take the actions needed to implement a local control function before the end of 2020. Then the COVID crisis struck.

Advocacy for Local Control of Parole in 2020

Given that the USPC's term was scheduled sunset at the end of 2020, and that there were no indications that the Mayor or the Council were going to take any substantive action on the issue, it was clear that another reauthorization by Congress would happen. Advocates were united in their desire to see that the new reauthorization would be the last and for as short a time period as possible.

Despite the challenges of the COVID crisis, advocates have been very active in 2020 working to obtain some level of assurances from the Mayor and the Council that they will take concrete actions to take over the parole function before the next Congressional reauthorization term expires.

A Concise Timeline of Advocacy Through the End of July 2020

May 2020

The co-chairs of the Reentry Task Force, supported by advocates from the ReThink Justice New Visions Committee and others, published *A Community Call for Action* on the issue.¹ This two-page document summarizes the local control of parole issues and presents to the Mayor, Council and other city officials specific actions to be taken to that end.

Some advocates are told that the Mayor had instructed Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton to request a five-year reauthorization of the USPC. News of this development results in a flurry of advocacy activity to get the Congressional extension for the USPC to be no more than two years.

June 2020

Several advocates and advocacy groups submit testimony to the DC Council Judiciary Committee and the Committee of the Whole in support of local control over the parole authority.

ReThink Justice Coalition participant, Deacon Julie Petersmeyer, organizes a faith leader sign-on letter supporting local control. The letter, with over 50 signatories, is sent to the Mayor and the DC City Council.² ReThink Justice DC

¹ <http://rethinkjusticedc.org/CCTA>. *The Community Call To Action* document was updated in June.

² <http://rethinkjusticedc.org/LCclergy>

Coalition New Vision Committee co-chair submitted testimony DC Council Committee of the Whole on the issue.³

The DC Jails and Justice Task Force's Committee on Local Control⁴ met to discuss the status of the local control of the parole function, among other items. The Task Force has undertaken to recommend to the District government a model for the local control function.

The DC City Council concludes its final budget action without allocating any funds to support a transition to local control of parole.

July 2020

The Mayor makes public a letter she sent to Congresswoman Norton in which she requested a two-year extension for the United States Parole Commission, at the conclusion of which time she commits the District to assuming control of the parole function. Her letter connects the parole issue with the cause of DC statehood.

The Task Force on Jails and Justice Local Control Committee meets to assess the strengths and weaknesses of two different models for the parole function: (1) an entity formed and operating under the executive branch, and (2) a judicial model where the function would be housed in the DC Superior Court. No decision is reached.

Some advocates confirm that Representative Norton has asked Congress to authorize a two-year extension of the USPC. Norton's draft legislation includes language referring to the transfer of parole functions to DC control after the USPC authorization ends.

A conversation with the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety is organized to take place in August. The purpose is to discuss next steps for local control.

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³ <http://rethinkjusticedc.org/RTJtest06>

⁴ <http://www.courtexcellence.org/what-we-do/civil-justice/task-force>