

## Unlocking big savings

By Walter Lomax

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Maryland is facing a serious budget crisis. One way the state could save money is by improving the parole system.

This is a subject I know something about. I spent decades in the Maryland prison system, serving a life sentence for a crime I didn't commit, before I was exonerated. While my situation was unusual, there are many people serving long sentences in state prisons who pose little threat to society and are deserving of parole.

The state could save millions of dollars, while still preserving public safety, by releasing many low-risk individuals onto parole. A recent report by the Justice Policy Institute, "The Release Valve: Parole in Maryland," notes that in 2007, the state spent approximately \$1,422 per person on parole or probation, while it spent \$33,310 per person on incarceration. Just by paroling an additional 100 people, the report concludes, Maryland could potentially save about \$3 million over the course of one year without compromising public safety.

Maryland should look for ways to increase the number of people being released onto supervision, including those serving parole-eligible life sentences - a group that has been effectively barred from parole for more than a decade because of political roadblocks.

In 1993, after a person in the work-release program committed a murder-suicide, everyone serving parole-eligible life sentences was removed from the prerelease system and returned to medium-security prisons. Previously, people serving parole-eligible life sentences had started their sentences in maximum security, then progressed to medium, minimum, then to prerelease, which included work release, family leaves and eventually parole.

It was said at the time that people with parole-eligible life sentences would be evaluated and those found eligible would be returned to those programs. That never happened. In 1995, newly elected Gov. Parris Glendening declined to consider releasing anyone serving a life sentence, even if the person was eligible for parole, unless he or she was terminally ill or very old. Subsequent administrations have continued this practice. As of July 2008, there were over 2,328 people serving parole-eligible life sentences in Maryland, more than two-thirds of whom are African-American.

Many of the people with parole-eligible sentences are getting older, and research shows most people "age out" of crime; therefore, moving people from prison to parole could be done safely and result in significant savings. About 465 people in Maryland's prisons are older than 60; by placing half of them on parole, the state could save more than \$13 million in the first year.

On Saturday, Senate Bill 900, introduced by state Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden of Baltimore, was heard; it is awaiting action. This bill states that a person who has served 20 years of a current life sentence, has received a recommendation to be released from the parole board and has a favorable evaluation from the prison should be allowed to appear before a three-judge panel for consideration of release. Currently, such people must rely on approval from the governor - and, unfortunately, recent governors have denied parole regardless of positive recommendations from the parole board and corrections. The intention of SB 900 is to make the process less political and more based on evidence related to public safety.

Maryland can save money by returning people who are parole-eligible and have met the stated guidelines for parole to their communities and families. People who have met the guidelines and demonstrated that they deserve a second chance should get one; SB 900 is an important step in that direction.

Walter Lomax was serving a parole-eligible life sentence in Maryland until he was exonerated and released in 2006 after 39 years in prison. His organization, the Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative, seeks to create opportunities for those serving parole-eligible life and long-term sentences to receive a meaningful chance of release.

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