



**Testimony of Theodore Johnson, Chairman
Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole
Senate Judiciary Committee
June 26, 2019**

Good morning Chairman Baker, Chairman Farnese and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, my name is Ted Johnson and I am the Chairman of the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole. On behalf of Governor Wolf I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about probation and parole reform in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

First of all, I'd like to congratulate you and all members of the legislature for your bi-partisan efforts thus far. The recently Senate passed JRI -2 package along with proposals on probation reform, sentencing reform and others, is setting the standard for the nation. Again, I, along with the Governor, commend you for this historic bi-partisan effort.

While I am new in my Chairman role for the Commonwealth, I bring to our current discussion many years of experience in county and federal probation services. As a background to where we hope these efforts are going, I thought it appropriate to discuss my experiences with you and the members.

I have enjoyed 43 years in federal law enforcement and court supervision. In those 43 years, I have seen justice reform swing back and forth from a social work focus to a get tough on crime focus.

I have seen knee jerk reactions from legislative bodies to crack cocaine and to a single act of violence that led to extreme measures of long incarceration periods for everyone convicted of a crime - no matter the circumstances.

Those knee jerk reactions led to young adults serving long periods of incarceration for a few tiny rocks of crack cocaine, while grown men were given probation for the same substance in powder form. I have witnessed the suspension of parole of any kind due to a single act of violence.

All of these reactions resulted in inconsistent sentencing, overcrowded prisons, the release of inmates not prepared for reentry and the continued incarceration of elderly and mentally incapacitated inmates without proper medical care.

Those times were frustrating times for both me and my colleagues in criminal justice.

As work continues on JRI 2 legislation currently, you also have legislation sponsored by Senators Williams and Bartolotta. This proposal has been referred to by some supporters as the Robert Rihmeek "Meek Mill" Williams law. It is designed in part to provide persons on county probation with shorter sentences for technical probation violations.



Additionally, the bill lays out new requirements and guidelines for how someone on county probation can be sentenced to jail or have their current sentence changed. This is a change I hope you and your colleagues examine in coordination with your ongoing JRI 2 efforts.

Change is never easy. Change within the criminal justice has never been easy. However, in the last three years as a member of the Pennsylvania Parole Board, I have witnessed some amazing things happen.

I have seen a state that housed the most juvenile lifers in the country come together to solve a problem.

I saw the courts, prosecutors and defense attorneys come together and create a path for these juvenile offenders to be considered for parole. I witnessed this Board and the Department of Corrections work together to prepare these men and women for life after incarceration.

And I have seen the parole agents' work with the parolees themselves and the communities where they live, to develop and support a successful reentry program.

This collaboration is a positive example of what this justice reform legislation can do for the state of Pennsylvania.

Automatic parole will ensure a fair and measured time of incarceration for nonviolent crimes and violations.

It will ensure a safe and humane release for elderly offenders who are both physically and mentally incapacitated.

It will provide the needed care thru Medicaid and Medicare outside in a safe facility.

It will provide the DOC with needed bed space for those more violent inmates without the need to build more prisons.

And...for me finally...it will give the people doing the work ~ the Board, parole supervision, DOC, victim advocates and the communities themselves ~ a chance to come together and develop a safe and fair reentry for the incarcerated individuals deserving a second chance.

My passion for this work continues and I am in support of any improvements that can be made to assist these populations.

I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.