



**TESTIMONY OF CHRISTIAN GONZÁLEZ-RIVERA
OF THE BROOKDALE CENTER FOR HEALTHY AGING, HUNTER COLLEGE
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON AGING AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING
"JUSTICE IN AGING – REENTRY ISSUES FOR OLDER NEW YORKERS"**

FEBRUARY 17, 2023

My name is christian gonzález-rivera and I'm the director of strategic policy initiatives at the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, a research and policy center based at Hunter College.

Thank you, Chair Hudson for calling this hearing and introducing Resolution 241. In it, you highlight facts that show that elder justice means changing the unfair way the parole process handles the cases of older people who have spent much of their lives in prison. You point out that taxpayers are spending money on perpetuating human suffering with no result in terms of more public safety. And you detail how a systematically unjust system allows systemic racism to fester.

Prison is no place to grow old. The poor nutrition and medical care offered in prison, combined with the physical and emotional stress of prison life result in incarcerated people exhibiting sickness and disability much earlier than people outside. This means that people in their 50s in prison are like people in their 70s and 80s outside in terms of their physical and cognitive health. The average age of death for people in NYS prisons is just 58 years. If NYS prisons were a country, a life expectancy of 58 would rank it near the bottom of all the world's countries. In contrast, New Yorkers not in the prison system have a life expectancy of 81.

Keeping people inside after they have already served long sentences rapidly closes the window of opportunity for individuals to go back to their communities rebuild their lives. As you know, it is already difficult for older people to get a job that will allow them to afford a decent place to live, despite the experience they can bring to a job. For people getting out of prison after they are already older, the job of building a decent life is just that much harder.

By supporting the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole legislation, you are taking the first important step in correcting this injustice. I know you know this, but it bears repeating into the record: these bills would not hand out a "Get out of Prison Free" card. They simply entitle people who have already served 15 or more years and are 55 and above to a fair chance at having the parole board consider their case. We are supporting this legislation because we know that if New York had a fair and humane parole process, there would be many more parents, grandparents, friends, lovers, and active citizens back in the communities that are missing their efforts and energy. People like the ones you heard from in the first public panel.

People end up in prison largely because society failed to take care of them, particularly when they are young. Case in point, one cross-sectional study found that 70 percent of Black high school dropouts ended up in prison

at some point before they turned 30. Failing to give older, incarcerated people a real chance to demonstrate their rehabilitation is just adding more insult to a life that society has already failed in every possible way.

From 2010-2020, 1,278 people died in custody of New York State prisons. That is more than the 1,130 who have ever been executed in New York State. Half of all deaths in prison are among people over 50. Allowing people to age and then die in prison is cruel and unusual punishment that a moral society cannot tolerate.

Thank you also for the opportunity to testify.

Appendices

For additional information on elder parole, please refer to these additional materials. We provide the first two in print form as an appendix to this testimony, as well as in the links to our website, below. The third is a video.

We compiled a factsheet that summarizes the research that shows that these bills are sound policy.

<https://brookdale.org/fact-sheet-elder-parole-is-an-aging-issue/>

Dr. Ruth Finkelstein, our executive director, submitted this written testimony to the NYS Senate for their December 7, 2022 hearing on these bills.

<https://brookdale.org/parole-justice-testimony/>

We hosted a virtual panel on December 14, 2022 in collaboration with the State Society on Aging of New York, LiveOn NY, and RAPP (Release Aging People in Prison), that featured stories of people returning from prison and their family members. More than 100 aging services providers from across the state attended.

<https://brookdale.org/news/panel-highlights-issue-of-older-adults-in-prison/>