

# The High Cost of Incarcerating the Elderly and Infirm in the Massachusetts Prison System



Can an elderly prisoner like this one be called a legitimate threat to public safety?

# **Should Massachusetts taxpayers continue to pay upwards of \$100,000 per year, per. Inmate, to keep elderly and infirm prisoners locked up in Massachusetts prisons, or should we look for better alternatives than incarceration?**

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## **Facts about elderly and chronically ill prisoners currently being held in Massachusetts state prisons.**

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- The National Institute of Corrections defines elderly prisoners as those who are aged 50 and above because prisoners on average have significant health problems which cause them to age more rapidly.
- According to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. At the end of 2013, almost 270,000 U.S. prisoners were 50 years or older, or 18% of a prison population of 1.5 million.
- The United States currently spends in excess of \$16 billion annually incarcerating individuals aged 50 and older – more than the entire Department of Energy budget or Department of Education funding for school improvements.
- The American Civil Liberties Union estimates that by 2030 there will be 400,000 prisoners aged 50 or older incarcerated in the U.S.
- According to the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) on January 1, 2014 there were 2,515 prisoners age 50 or over in DOC custody. Of those 1,025 were age 50-54, 685 were 55-59, 380 were 60-64, 244 were 65-69, and 181 were age 70 and over.
- From 2009 to 2014, the number of prisoners in Massachusetts 50 years and older increased by 18%. If that rate continues, by 2030 it is estimated that there will be over 4,300 prisoners age 50 or older.
- The National Center of Institutions and Alternatives estimates that the annual cost of incarcerating an elderly prisoner to be \$69,000, over three times the cost for a younger prisoner.
- As of January 1, 2014 there were 805 prisoners age 60 or older being held by the DOC. (787 males and 18 females)
- The oldest prisoner currently being held by the DOC is 91 years of age.
- According to the 2013 Department of Correction Annual Report, medical care for prisoners cost Massachusetts taxpayers \$98,520,685, up 13% from 2009. By 2015 that figure is expected to far exceed \$100,000,000. 18% of the nearly \$550,000,000 spent by the

DOC each year is for medical care for prisoners.

- Massachusetts state officials estimate that the state will need to build separate, specialized long-term care units for the chronically ill and disabled for at least 600 prisoners.
- On any given day, there are approximately 40 to 50 Massachusetts state prisoners housed in what is commonly referred to as Skilled Nursing Facilities. There are only two such units operating in the DOC housing less than 50 chronically ill prisoners.

- Between 2010 and 2014, 195 Massachusetts state prisoners died while being held in DOC custody. 164 (84%) were due to long term or chronic illness.
- At least 224 life term prisoners in the custody of the Massachusetts Department of Correction have died while in prison over the past few decades.
- Due to the high cost of medical care and housing, holding in secure facilities – as is the present custom – those prisoners who have debilitating chronic diseases care cost more than \$100,000 for each prisoner each year.

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## What can be done to effectively reduce the astronomical cost of prisoner health care?

The current trajectory on this critical issue is economically infeasible and morally untenable. We cannot settle for the status quo any longer, immediate action should be taken to curb the exorbitant economic cost and to vastly improve prison health care for aged and infirm prisoners.

### **The following steps should be taken:**

- Enact legislation to release aged/or infirm male and female prisoners who pose no risk to society to supervised medical care.
- Provide medical care for male and female prisoners that meets community based standards.
- Provide Assisted Daily Living facilities within appropriate institutions which meet the health and welfare needs of male and female

prisoners who are no longer able to take care of themselves.

- Provide meaningful program options to elderly prisoners which would positively affect their health – both mentally and physically.
- Train and utilize life and long term prisoners as basic health care providers, resulting in substantial cost savings.
- Support meaningful legislation that calls for the supervised medical release of prisoners suffering from chronic illness.
- Call, e-mail or write your local State Representative or State Senator and request that he or she support medical release legislation.

**Grass Roots Community Involvement and Organization is desperately needed if we are to achieve our objective of humane health care for elderly and infirm male and female prisoners incarcerated in Massachusetts.**

If you are a member of a Church Group, Community Social Organization, or simply a neighborhood Tea Club, we respectfully ask for your help. Yes, it is true that many years ago some offenders committed serious crimes. Many of these now elderly and infirm men and women have already paid dearly for those earlier transgressions through years of incarceration. Today, an ever growing number of those former offenders are very ill, some are dying, and are asking for your forgiveness.

While it falls on each of us to look deep inside his or her own heart to find forgiveness and mercy, it can indeed be self fulfilling to bestow mercy on those who have spent decades in prison, are old, infirm, or debilitated and who are incapable of posing any threat to society.

**Within our Criminal Justice System  
punishment is morally justified. However,  
our system of justice is at its best when  
punishment is tempered with mercy**

If you would like more information on this critical issue, please contact

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