

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Parole In Wisconsin

There are still over 2500 men and women in Wisconsin prisons who were sent there before the current Truth-In-Sentencing laws took effect in 1999. Some of these prisoners are serving life without parole while others have parole eligibility dates beyond their life expectancy. But most of them currently are, or soon will be, eligible for release on parole.

Gov. Scott Walker appointed a new parole commission chairman in 2015 in response to an outcry by activists that the chairperson at that time was not granting anyone release on parole. For a few months after his appointment, Dean Stensberg was issuing decisions intended to transition old law prisoners to release on parole.

But shortly after Gov. Walker ended his bid for U.S. president, Stensberg changed his tune. Each prisoner who is denied release on parole is given a new eligibility date. A new date which is less than 12 months away indicates the possibility of release within the next year. The longer the deferral, the less likely the prisoner will be seriously considered for release on parole.

Horror stories are now circulating about all the prisoners who have had their deferrals extended to new, unheard of lengths as a result of Stensberg's involvement. In every instance where Stensberg became personally involved in the final decision, the deferral period has been increased.

One lifer in minimum security had his defer increased to 24 months (he was once down to an 8 month defer). Several prisoners in Stanley have gone from 12 month deferrals to 24 or 36 month deferrals. I recently had my deferral increased from 12 to 36 months (I was once down to an 8 month deferral).

The interesting thing about my case is that when Stensberg was the program review coordinator in Oakhill in 2005, he approved me for placement in a work release center. As a result of his 2005 decision, I spent 19 months going out into the community every day to work in a factory. I proved that I am not a risk to anyone. Clearly, Stensberg's current decision's have nothing to do with a prisoner's suitability for release on parole and everything to do with politics. I have been parole-eligible

for 20 years and am now serving a longer parole deferral than I have ever had at any time before this.

The parole system in Wisconsin is broken. Old men and women who pose no risk to the public are being warehoused in prison for no legitimate reason. There is no easy answer to this problem in Wisconsin. While the rest of the country is acknowledging that incarceration is not the answer, Gov. Walker is seeking to hold more people in prison for longer terms.

Perhaps the voters will speak out in the November elections and let the Republicans who are currently running Wisconsin know that their policies are unfair, unjust and the wrong path for Wisconsin.