

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Abolish the Wisconsin Parole Commission

I recently read some of the 2014 statistics on prisoners still serving sentences under the pre-1999 Truth-In-Sentencing laws which abolished parole.

As of Dec. 31, 2014, there were 2,618 parole-eligible prisoners. Out of that total, 263 voluntarily withdrew from parole consideration, 212 waived parole consideration and 133 were deferred to discharge on their sentence. Twenty-seven percent are serving a life sentence, 29% have served over 20 years and approximately 15% are over age 60. Also, 98% are male, 52% are white, 70% do not have a mental health condition, and 77% are over 40 years of age.

Each year, the parole commission grants fewer paroles. The budget for the parole commission is \$1 million per year - about the same as it was in 1999 when there were over 20,000 prisoners eligible for release on parole. The commission's work load has decreased by 90% from its 1999 level, yet the budget is still the same and there are just as many commission members now as there were in 1999.

I think the real reason paroles are not being issued is because commission members do not want to work themselves out of a job. The chairperson's pay range is \$65,000-107,000 while the range for commission members is slightly less than that. If you had a high-paying job where there were no guidelines or criteria you were required to follow, and you knew that granting paroles would put you out of a job, what would you do? Stop granting paroles, of course!

There are thousands of citizens languishing in prison solely because the parole commission is afraid of working itself out of a job. These elderly men and woman could be safely released, saving the state millions of dollars.

It's time the legislature enacted a paroling statute that takes the discretion away from the parole commission. All citizens being held under the old laws should be released immediately upon reaching parole eligibility unless the commission can prove to a judge by clear and convincing evidence that release would result in risk to a specific individual. If someone is too dangerous to release, then let the commission provide current, credible facts to establish that fact. This would create a presumption of immediate release on parole for thousands of prisoners. The only time the parole commission could act is when it would seek a court order to block a specific prisoner's release.