

November 8, 2013

The Honorable Deval Patrick  
Massachusetts State House  
Office of the Governor  
State House - Room 280  
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Parole Board Vacancy

Dear Governor Patrick:

We are members of a coalition of individuals, agencies, and associations of Massachusetts residents that advocate for fairness in criminal justice proceedings, corrections and parole. We are writing to advocate for the fairest possible process in filling the current Parole Board vacancy with an individual who is both committed to the objectives of parole and who has a background in substance misuse and alcohol addiction.

We understand that the statute governing appointments to the Parole Board, M.G.L. c.27, sec. 4, calls for persons to be appointed to the Board who have had at least five years of education and experience in either “parole, probation, corrections, law, law enforcement, psychology, psychiatry, sociology [or] social work.” We are asking you to nominate a candidate who has had at least five years of experience in treating drug addiction and alcoholism.

According to the Department of Correction, approximately 80% of the persons incarcerated in Massachusetts state prisons have issues with substance addiction.<sup>1/</sup> Sheriffs estimate that the same figure is true for the house of correction population.<sup>2/</sup> The vast majority of criminal behavior in the State is influenced by or somehow involves substance misuse.

It is clear that the Commonwealth would be best served by having Parole Board members who are versed in the issues that face those in our prisons. When prisoners appear at their parole hearings, there are three areas on which the Board generally focuses in determining readiness for parole: the prisoner’s understanding of the causal factors of the crime; what the prisoner has done during his or her incarceration to address or treat the causal factors; and what resources or supports the prisoner will need in the community to succeed. Accordingly, in approximately 80% of the cases the Parole Board hears, expertise in substance misuse is necessary in making an

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<sup>1/</sup> DOC’s Talking Points: *Massachusetts Department of Correction Use of Non-Aggressive Drug Detection Canines*, “Approximately eighty percent of inmates self-report addiction or more than recreational use of drugs and alcohol.”

<sup>2/</sup> “Middlesex Sheriff’s Office awarded \$30,000 Substance Abuse Grant” “Approximately 75-80% of the inmate population at the House of Correction in Billerica report alcohol and substance abuse issues.” <http://www.wickedlocal.com/medford/news/x1623571546/Middlesex-Sheriff-s-Office-awarded-30-000-Substance-Abuse-Grant>

informed and sensible decision. Our Parole Board, however, does not appear to have any members who have treated or worked in a professional capacity with persons suffering from drug addiction or alcoholism. At present there are two former prosecutors on the Board (Chairman Josh Wall and Ina Howard-Hogan), one former defense attorney (Tonomey Coleman), one former corrections administrator (Sheila Dupre), one former victim advocate (Lucy Soto-Abbe) and one former court clinician (psychologist Charlene Bonner). Although Ms. Soto-Abbe has a degree in forensic psychology and may have studied substance misuse, it does not appear that she has experience in diagnosing, treating, or working with this population. She worked in the Hampden District Attorney's Office as a victim/witness advocate since graduating college until the time of her appointment to the Board. Similarly, Dr. Bonner worked primarily as a court clinician and did not treat persons suffering from addiction to substances in her work as a psychologist.

An expert on substance misuse on the Board would not only contribute to more probative parole hearings, but such a Board member would be an invaluable asset in designing optimal parole plans. For example, when a person who is doing well on parole tests positive for alcohol or drug use, studies of evidence-based practices unequivocally state that for such technical violations the person should be treated in the community, not returned to prison. In Massachusetts, however, the Board frequently returns such persons to prison.

In addition, it is our understanding that a new qualification of five years of experience in business or public administration is being required to fill this particular vacancy. Such a requirement seems unnecessary and could well be a barrier to attracting qualified candidates for the position. We ask that well-qualified candidates not be excluded simply because they lack this experience and that the Governor's office re-post for the position removing the requirement. We also understand that resumes for the vacancy are being directed to Chairman Wall for initial review rather than to the Governor's office. Such a practice raises questions about the impartiality of the process and runs the risk of inadequately considering the objective needs of the Parole Board. We urge the Governor's office to review all applicants' resumes and to lead the hiring process. Finally, we ask the Governor's office to ensure that the process of filling the vacancy is impartial and results in a candidate who can add a new and much needed dimension of expertise to the Board.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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