

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Executive Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser



Public Roundtable on
Local Control of Parole in the District of Columbia

Testimony of
Chris Geldart

Acting Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
Charles Allen, Chairperson
Council of the District of Columbia

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Good afternoon, Chairperson Allen, members, and staff of the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety. I am Chris Geldart, Acting Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice, and I am here to discuss the Executive's support for local control of the Parole Board, and what I see as the next steps the District and Congress must take to achieve this goal.

The District Needs to Regain Control Over its Parole Board

Since August 4, 1997, the U.S. Parole Commission has exercised authority over District residents in making parole decisions in granting or denying parole release, revoking parole supervision, and terminating the period of time a person is on supervision. Their control over District residents is a relic from the Control Board era and the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Government Improvement Act, commonly known as the D.C. Revitalization Act, which transferred over control of prosecutorial and correctional control to the federal government. By working with Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and the Mayor's Office of Federal and Regional Affairs, we were able to secure a two-year reauthorization of the U.S. Parole Commission, which will now sunset on September 30, 2022, with the goal of the District being ready to regain control at the start of Fiscal Year 2023. Achieving this goal will require us working quickly and collaboratively both with Council and Congress.

I want to be absolutely clear that Mayor Bowser supports the District regaining control over its parole board. A newly-constituted Parole Board would be responsible for three critical decisions regarding the District's returning citizen population:

- 1) Deciding whether to grant parole for persons serving prison sentences;
- 2) Revocation of parole for persons who have been returned to the community, but continue to be monitored by supervision authorities; and
- 3) Termination of parole for persons eligible to end their supervision period.

When these decisions are being made about District residents, they should be guided by District values on access to reentry and credible assessments of a person's recidivism risk. Most importantly, a parole board making decisions about District residents, needs to be composed of District residents and held accountable to District residents. The current parole commission that has such an impact on our returning citizen community is an ongoing vestige of our colonial status and it needs to end.

Since the federal government's takeover of significant components of the District's criminal justice system during the Control Board era, it has implemented several changes that have harmful impacts on our incarcerated population and their families. These impacts include sending District residents far from home to serve their sentences, reentry complicated by a lack of sufficient preparation and legal support, high rates of parole denial and parole revocation. We need a more progressive system that reflects our DC Values. This includes fair and meaningful opportunities for parole release at grant hearings, including consideration for medical and geriatric parole, providing due process protections in the parole grant and revocation process, consideration of an individual's achievements and accomplishments while incarcerated and on parole, and ending parole when supervision goals have been met.

Timeline to Regaining Control of the Parole Board

There is much work to be done between now and the sunset of the U.S. Parole Commission on September 30, 2022. We are in the process of identifying a project manager to oversee the work that needs to be done with District and federal agencies, reentry organizations, Council, and Congress. This will involve creating an operating framework for a D.C. Parole Board and its guiding principles to ensure it reflects our city's values, such as:

- Reducing unnecessary detention;
- Ensuring due process safeguards during the parole process;
- Making fair parole release decisions; and
- Being transparent and accountable to the community.

We know there will be financial needs to establish and sustain a new parole board, including the potential costs of hiring current staff from the U.S. Parole Commission to work at the District's Parole Board. There is work to be done with legal experts and community stakeholders to determine best practices for parole release and revocation decisionmaking, identify logistics for the transfer of authority from the federal government, and procedures for data collection and reporting protocols, among other items.

All of this will require regular conversations between all of us that have spoken at today's hearing. We have a big task ahead of us, but we have the very real potential for regaining control over one significant part of our justice system.

Chairperson Allen, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate everyone's testimony and passion on this issue. I welcome your questions.