

# PAROLE PREPARATION PROJECT



A PROJECT OF  
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## ASSEMBLING PAROLE PACKETS AND DRAFTING ADVOCACY LETTERS

As a volunteer, you will submit a parole packet that the Board of Parole will receive prior to interviewing the applicant you're working with. When we say parole packet, we refer to a large compilation of documents, which will include an advocacy letter from you (the volunteers), and other supporting documents, such as a personal statement from the applicant, letters of support, certificates and other documented accomplishments, photographs, evaluations, etc.

### TIMELINE

#### 4-6 weeks before the applicant's interview:

- Finish first draft of advocacy letter.
- Send advocacy letter, parole packet cover page and table of contents to the Coordinating Committee (Michelle, Andrea and Nora). We will do two rounds of edits.
- Send a copy of the advocacy letter to the applicant to get their input and feedback.

#### 2 weeks before the applicant's interview:

- Finalize the advocacy letter and compile the packet.
- Send three complete and bound packets to the SORC, who will then deliver it to the Board. (See the end of this memo for instructions on where and how to send the packet.)
- Send a copy of the complete packet to the applicant.
- Scan and save a complete copy of the packet for your file.

#### 5-7 days before the interview:

- Confirm that the SORC received the packet and is prepared to deliver it to the Board.
- Confirm that the applicant received their copy.

### ADVOCACY LETTERS

#### **Who will read the advocacy letter?**

The primary audience is the Parole Board. Remember that [Parole Board Commissioners](#) are appointed by the Governor. Many are former prosecutors, police and parole officers, and investigators.

#### **What is the purpose of the letter?**

The purpose of the letter is to advocate for the person you're working with, and to convince the Board that the person is undoubtedly ready to be released. You do this by humanizing the person you're working with, sharing stories and anecdotes about them, and persuading the Commissioners that the person will thrive once they're released (and that they've already

accomplished a great deal while inside). The goal of the letter is also to differentiate the applicant from others who are seeking parole release. How is the person you are working with exceptional? What makes them special?

### **What else should our team include in the advocacy letter?**

Because the Parole Board's decision whether to release someone serving an indeterminate sentence on parole is entirely discretionary, it is useful for you to be familiar with the factors that the Parole Board is required to consider when exercising their discretion whether to grant parole.<sup>1</sup> The Board must consider a person's institutional record, release plans, deportation orders (if there are any), prior criminal record, statements by victims of the crime, the seriousness of the offense, and several others.

In your letter, address as many of these factors as possible, focusing especially on those over which the applicant actually has some control (e.g., their accomplishments in prison, release plans, demonstration of community support and achievements while inside).

Your letter should also be well-organized (likely with headings), succinct, and easily digestible. Write an introduction that includes the strongest reasons why the applicant is suitable for release (e.g., excellent disciplinary record, completion of various programs in prison, and/or a realistic release plan that includes lots of family or community support). Later explain why any possible areas of concern are not actually a reason to deny release (e.g., applicant has been sober for X years, completed substance abuse programs in prison, and/or has identified a treatment program or support group as part of a relapse prevention plan upon release).

Many volunteers chose to order their letters chronologically, starting with the applicant's early life, moving to the crime, the person's accomplishments in prison and then addressing release plans.

### **How long should the advocacy letter be?**

The length and content of your advocacy letter will depend largely on the parole applicant, as well as how long you've been able to work together. Generally speaking, the *advocacy letter should be between 4-6 pages double spaced* (in other words, shorter than this memo!).

### **Do you have any tips for writing an effective advocacy letter?**

There are sample advocacy letters for you to review on Google Drive. We recommend that you read a few in order to get a sense of how you might structure your letter and what you might want to include. But don't cut and paste! Imagine the damage to PPP's credibility and to our applicants' chances of release if the Board thinks they or we copied someone else's personal statement or advocacy letter. Remember, it's the Board that uses boilerplate language, not us!

Here are some **tips** we've compiled after reading lots of advocacy letters from our volunteers:

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<sup>1</sup> See NY [Executive Law § 259-i\(2\)\(c\)\(A\)](#).

- Avoid clichés
  - o Write the letter without phrases like “he’s a changed man,” “he wishes to make a positive contribution to society,” “she will be a law-abiding citizen,” “he will be a valuable member of community,” “he wants to help others,” “she’s not the same person she was X years ago” etc.
- Be conscious of your language
  - o We don’t use the word “inmate” because it is dehumanizing
  - o Use “people in prison,” “incarcerated people,” etc.
  - o Phrases like “model prisoner” or “model inmate” are phrases used by people in power and DOCCS, not us.
- Be concise
  - o It’s unlikely that the Board will even read the whole letter. Keep it short and don’t repeat yourself.
- *Advocate* for the person
  - o Don’t just give their resume. Talk about the person as if they absolutely deserve to be released and are the special person you know them to be!
  - o Share anecdotes and give the letter a more personal and intimate feel
  - o Describe the impact the person has had on you

### **How should we format the advocacy letter?**

- Use Parole Prep letterhead. The letterhead should be on the first page *only*.
- Pages should be numbered.
- Use a professional and easy to read font in size 12.
- The letter can be double or single-spaced.
- Break the letter into sections. Experiment with different formatting.
- Make sure you include the date, a subject line that includes the person’s name and DIN, and the address of where you are sending the letter and packet.

### **Who is the advocacy letter addressed to?**

While it is the Commissioners of the Board of Parole who will ultimately read the letter, advocacy letters and parole packets are mailed to the Senior Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator at the prison where the person is located (more on this below). In the address field on the letter, you should write the name of the SORC, the prison and the prison address. However, the “to” field should read “Dear Commissioners of the Board of Parole,” or something along those lines. See samples on the Google Drive for guidance.

### **Topics to address (also see the Advocacy Letter Checklist in the Google Drive):**

#### **1. Applicant’s early life**

Perhaps their family history, their experiences in or out of school, details about the neighborhood they grew up in, etc., will help contextualize their crime and their time in prison.

#### **2. The crime and acceptance of responsibility**

It’s important to describe the crime in detail. Tell the applicant’s story. What happened? What

was their role? Clarify any questions that the Board has raised in the past.

If the applicant you're working with has been able to accept responsibility for their crime, expressed feelings of remorse or even just sorrow at the harm their actions may have caused others, discuss it in the advocacy letter (with the applicant's permission, of course). Talk about how they arrived there—was there a certain life event, a book, a moment in a class, a religious experience, a conversation with a friend, etc., that allowed them to access those feelings?

If the applicant doesn't have access to feelings of remorse or responsibility, or is maintaining their innocence, that's ok. As a Project, we do not believe that there is any one way to express remorse, or any one way to feel about a crime. Further, we don't believe that a person's freedom should depend on their ability to express remorse, regret or guilt. Work together to figure out the best and most genuine framing.

Lastly, if the person does take responsibility for their crime, are there factors or circumstances that contributed to their participation? Perhaps it was an upbringing where violence and abuse were prevalent, or living in a community where the primary economy was based on buying and selling drugs. **While it's important that those factors aren't used as a justification of a person's actions, showing insight into how the crime happened and the context in which it occurred can be powerful and persuasive.**

### 3. Applicant's accomplishments in prison

What are the applicant's proudest moments and greatest achievements since being in prison? How have they spent their time? Have they completed any therapeutic programs? Were they a participant in those programs or also a facilitator? Have they achieved any special awards or certificates? Do they have any educational accomplishments? Has the applicant held any jobs within the institution for more than a year?

### 4. Disciplinary Record

What is the applicant's disciplinary record like? If there are lots of disciplinary infractions, can you identify recent progress – such as a reduction in the number of write-ups for serious infractions—or a recent period with no write-ups (and if so, is there any factor you can point to that accounts for the cessation in write-ups, which reflects a shift in the applicant's experience)? Has the applicant been free of any disciplinary infractions for a long period of time? Are the disciplinary infractions on their record more “administrative” and “non-violent” in nature? There's a document on Google Drive that provides more information on mitigating disciplinary records.

### 5. Outline of reentry and parole plan

Include plans for where the applicant will live, what educational or employment opportunities they will pursue, and/or any other supportive programming in which the applicant intends to participate.

Include details about organizations that the applicant may have reached out to, or any

supportive programs that specifically address issues that the Parole Board or sentencing court have raised (e.g., if the applicant has a documented history of substance use, even if it was many years ago, include a relapse-prevention plan).

These release plans can and should be supplemented by letters of reasonable assurance that you and the applicant have collected. You can reference the letters of reasonable assurance directly in your advocacy letter.

#### 6. Special reentry circumstances (deportation or out-of-state transfers)

If you are working with an applicant who is not a citizen, in most circumstances the applicant will be deported if granted parole. Thus, the applicant's parole release plan should include a plan for the applicant's country of origin. The Board is sometimes suspicious, however, that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will do their job. Include a local release plan to show that you and the applicant have considered this possibility.

Some applicants may wish to parole to another state or city. Because the transfer of parole is complicated and often does not occur until a person is actually released, some applicants may have two release plans. One plan will include resources in the county/city to which they will first return (generally where the person was convicted), and the second plan will involve the location where they ultimately wish to reside.

#### 7. References to letters of support

Help applicants collect as many letters of support from community members as possible – including from family members, friends, neighbors, previous or future employers, religious leaders, etc. Some applicants may also wish to ask correctional staff or other DOCCS staff to write letters of support. Some staff may be willing. Throughout your advocacy letter you should reference these letters of support, and even quote from them, if there is a particularly compelling part that you'd like to highlight.

#### 8. COMPAS score and risk of "recidivism"

When a person goes before the Parole Board, their DOCCS counselor administers the COMPAS risk evaluation. COMPAS supposedly measures the "risk" that a person poses to public safety. While it is well-documented that COMPAS is a racist and deeply flawed instrument, the Board is required to consider it in their evaluation. "Low" COMPAS scores signify a lower likelihood of recidivism. "High" scores indicate a higher "risk" to public safety. In the advocacy letter, it's your job to highlight "low" scores and give reasoning for "high" scores.

#### 9. Other details about the applicant

Throughout the letter you should find ways to humanize the person you're working with, and share stories and anecdotes about them. Talk about their personality, their humor, their sensitivity, their generosity—whatever it is that makes them unique. Is there a particularly memorable moment or conversation you can share? What impact have they had on your life? Why do you believe this person should be released?

## PAROLE PACKETS

### **What should the parole packet include?**

The parole packet (e.g., the supporting materials that accompany your advocacy letter) should include anything mentioned in your advocacy letter, such as copies of certificates of accomplishment; treatment programs completed; educational achievements; vocational training certificates; letters of reasonable assurance (e.g., letters from reentry programs confirming that they will work with the applicant upon his or her release); letters of support from community members; and, in some cases, a personal letter from the applicant. Some applicants even include their resumes, photographs and other less traditional pieces of advocacy.

The applicant you're working with may also chose to include a copy of their COMPAS risk assessment and other institutional records. However, we recommend that you leave out court documents such as the pre-sentence report (PSR) and documents like the sentencing minutes, as they are often highly prejudicial to the applicant. Further, it is the Board's responsibility to obtain and review these documents.

### **How is the packet organized?**

Cover Page: The parole packet should be organized into different sections. There should be a cover page that makes clear that this is an advocacy packet from the Parole Preparation Project on behalf of the applicant (so as not to be confused with any additional "packets" of information the Board may receive). Make sure to identify the applicant by their name and DIN.

Table of Contents: There should also be a table of contents that lists the various sections and the page numbers where they begin. This should come after the cover page.

Sections: Consult with the applicant you're working with to determine which sections or documents come first. Some applicants prefer that the advocacy letter that the PPP volunteers write be at the beginning in order to provide context and a framework for the packet. Other applicants prefer that their personal statements or other documents come first. The remaining sections will depend on what materials you have to include. One section may be certificates, another section may be devoted to letters of support. The sections can be divided by colored paper, tabs or dividers.

### **How do we bind the packet?**

You need to bind each copy of the applicant's parole packet. This way we can be sure that the Board will see the packet the exact way you intended for it to appear. Please do not use a binding service where you must send an electronic file, or leave the packet for the day or overnight (for obvious confidentiality reasons).

In terms of binding, we prefer the black tape binding (sometimes called black linen tape). You can also use a plastic coil binding, but make sure not to use any metal. It may be easier to bind the copy you send to the Board and leave the applicant's copy unbound. Many of the traditional

binding materials are prohibited in prison. Consult with the applicant you're working with for more info on this.

**Where do we send the parole packet?**

- 1. Mail THREE COPIES to the Supervising Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator 7-10 DAYS before the parole interview***

The SORC at the facility where the applicant is located is responsible for reviewing all of the materials submitted and then physically bringing them to the Board of Parole Commissioners for review.

If you don't know who the SORC is who is in charge of reviewing parole materials, call the prison and ask. At some facilities, the "Inmates Record Coordinator" has this responsibility.

We suggest that you mail it to the SORC via U.S. mail with some kind of tracking feature, and then call the SORC to make sure it was received.

We suggest that you also call the SORC the Friday before the interview to ask whether they can confirm that the Parole Board Commissioners received the packet.

- 1. Mail ONE COPY to the parole applicant 7-10 DAYS before the parole interview***

Send a hard copy of the packet to the applicant. Applicants should be familiar with the packet and be prepared to answer any questions that the Commissioners have about it (e.g., Commissioners may want to verify that the applicant was actually involved in creating the packet).

If possible, the applicant can ask at the beginning of their interview whether the Commissioners received the advocacy packet from the Parole Preparation Project. If they have not received it, the applicant can choose to delay their interview.

- 2. Save ONE COPY in the applicant's file***