Democracy’s Missing Voices

The backbone of the campaign for voting rights is the stories of the directly impacted. As our California chapters push for the passage of Proposition 17, which would restore voting rights to 50,000 parolees if it wins a majority vote in the November election, we’ve asked our membership to share their stories. We hope you will read them and be moved to push for change in your community. Page 6

The INjustice System

Who are the unsung heroes of the COVID pandemic? The men and women who serve as essential workers while also serving time. Incarcerated AOUON member Steve Brooks, who works in the prison kitchen gives a first-hand account. Page 4

Our Stories

General Parker has been getting into good trouble since he was 16. As the Chapter President of All of Us or None Central Illinois, he fights mass incarceration from all angles, including helping pass the federal First Step Act. Page 3

Wisconsin Dispatch

A dispatch from Wisconsin. AOUON WI president Caliph Muab-el shares what’s not getting reported: militia attacks with bleach, with flares, and the kidnapping and assault of protesters in Kenosha. Page 8
All of Us Or None

Self-Determination Pledge

As members of All of Us or None, we pledge:

- To demand the right to speak in our own voices
- To treat each other with respect and not allow differences to divide us
- To accept responsibility for any acts that may have caused harm to our families, our communities or ourselves.
- To fight all forms of discrimination
- To help build the economic stability of formerly incarcerated people
- To claim and take care of our own children and our families
- To support community struggles to stop using prisons as the answer to social problems
- To play an active role in making our communities safe for everyone.

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About the Artist: Cover image

“All I See is Freedom” is a painting by John McKeever, a participant in Rehabilitation through the Arts. John, an artist incarcerated in California, said this about the image he created:

“The water color is Freedom for all people within the US, physically as well as mentally. So that we all will be one mind, one people.” John is 68 years old and has been in prison since 1987.

Inside This Issue

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and All of Us or None have been actively pursuing the right to vote for people on parole in California. We engaged in advocacy in Sacramento to help get ACA6 passed out of the California legislature. It will now be on this November’s ballot as Proposition 17. Our website FreeTheVote2020.org contains information on Prop 17, as well as a history of disenfranchisement testimonials from people directly impacted, and voting rights resources. I encourage all All of Us or None members to get informed and engage in meaningful conversations with friends and family to help get this important proposition across the finish line.

Through this process, we’ve also learned to build an infrastructure to help All of Us or None and Legal Services for Prisoners with Children effectuate change in future elections. We are in the process of building something strong enough to carry us into 2021 when we will propose a bill to remove involuntary servitude from the California Constitution. In August, we worked with a national coalition to launch the Abolish Slavery National Network. This important, national initiative is crucial in the battle to end mass incarceration and slavery in its modern form. You can learn more about ASNN and how to get involved at abolishslavery.us.

We are fighting on many fronts and we appreciate your continuing support and solidarity. It’s All of Us or None!

Mail Bag

Kelin D. Harris had earned a transfer to a lower-security prison. Then COVID hit, transfers were delayed or cancelled and Kelin was trapped in a worst-case scenario. He shared his experience in a letter to All of Us or None. Page 5

Feature Story

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The INjustice System

The unsung heroes of the COVID pandemic? The men and women serving time and serving as essential workers at the same time. Page 4

Coming Home

Cole Bienek writes a firsthand experience of the methods being used by the criminal legal system to control him as a parolee. Page 10

Regional Highlight

Nearly 50,000 Californians on parole pay taxes at the local, state, and federal levels. However, they are not able to vote in local, state, or federal elections. That can change by voting YES on Proposition 17 this November.

Regional Highlight

A dispatch from Wisconsin. AOUON WI president Caliph Muab-el shares what’s not getting reported: militia attacks with bleach, with flares, and the kidnapping and assault of protesters in Kenosha. Page 8

A Note From AOUON Founding Member Dorsey Nunn

If you would like to send feedback or contribute to the All of Us or None newspaper, please contact the Editor.

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paula@prisonerswithchildren.org

Nearly 50,000 Californians on parole pay taxes at the local, state, and federal levels. However, they are not able to vote in local, state, or federal elections. That can change by voting YES on Proposition 17 this November.

FREE TH 2020
freethetvote2020.org

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Dorsey Nunn
General Parker was a single dad on probation. After a confrontation with his child’s mother, the police showed up at his house and took away his daughter, his ex snickering as the scene played out from a distance. After being told by his probation officer that what the police had done — taken his child without a warrant or a signature from a judge — was illegal, General went to the station to seek the names of the officers who were involved. “After they found out I was checking up on them, next thing you know, they violated my probation,” General recalled. “I got sent away for two years.”

General said all he had in prison was a photo of his daughter and a determination to expose and amend the injustices within the family court system. He had a community organizing background: When he was 16, he quit school and joined the Northside Action Council. Through his work at that organization, he met Cesar Chavez and talked to him about what got him started and where he found the courage to stand up for so many people.

“When I look back, I realize I’ve always been an agitator and an organizer and someone who stands up for the people who can’t stand up for themselves,” General said.

But he still had a lot to learn. In prison, he met Dennis Hampton. Dennis’ relative, Fred, was the deputy chairman of the national Black Panther Party and was killed in his bed during a joint raid by the FBI and Chicago Police Department. Dennis told General that he was a slave and read him the exception clause in the 13th Amendment. It struck a chord.

“My pastor had always told me whenever you end something with ‘except’ or ‘but’ you done just cancelled out everything you said before that,” General said. “Slavery is still here, it just changed from private to public ownership.”

General was paroled the same day the space shuttle Challenger explosion on January 26, 1986. He got connected immediately with organizations fighting for the rights of fathers. At a 2008 dinner in Charleston, W. Vir., where he was the keynote speaker, he met Mike McCormick, the national director of the American Coalition for Fathers and Children. He became the vice president of the Illinois affiliate of ACFC, Illinois Father, and worked on the landmark Stephen Watkins Act, a state law that provides non-custodial fathers a strong defense against visitation abuse.

General’s work as an advocate took him into spaces where he could interact with people like Michelle Alexander and Judge Arthur L. Burnett Sr., the first black judge appointed to the federal district court in DC. He started working with the Organization for Procedural Justice, which Burnett co-founded along with Dr. Merelyn Bates-Mims with the intention of changing the nation’s drug laws and lay the groundwork for the next Civil Rights Act.

He developed a reputation. “If there’s a good fight to be had I’m the first person they come to,” General said. “I saw farther than the fatherhood issues. I saw it was just a small part of the larger problem: mass incarceration.”

As the chapter head of AOÜON Central Illinois, General has committed to pass a resolution aimed at ending mass incarceration. He was recruited by Glenn Martin and Van Jones of Cut 50 to help pass the federal First Step Act, which constrains sentencing enhancements and ended mandatory minimums for many drug-related offenses. The First Step Act was enacted a year after the Central Illinois chapter was established. Now, General and the local AOÜON membership is advocating for those who may be eligible for early release under the new law’s “good-time credits” system.

“I never believed people should spend their life behind bars, because that one moment doesn’t define them,” General said. “I look at my kids, grandkids and now my great-grandson, Kingstyn and I want them to live free and free of fear, that they’re the next ones to die or be targeted.”

General Parker was getting into good trouble since he was 16. Today, he fights against mass incarceration as the AOÜON C. Illinois Chapter President. Photo courtesy General Parker
This Too Shall Pass

Life Inside Amid the COVID Pandemic

By Steve Brooks

Shouldn’t essential service workers who are incarcerated during the coronavirus pandemic be given credit for their heroic acts?

I am a 48-year-old African American man with asthma confined in a California prison. Everyday, while riots and unrest are happening in prisons around the world, I wake up at 3 a.m., I get dressed, I wash up, I put a mask over my face, I put on gloves, and I step out of my cell to go to work in the main kitchen. Instead of sheltering in place, I go assist in preparing the morning meals for 3,600 other incarcerated people during this coronavirus pandemic.

I am housed in what can only be described as an incubator under the worst case scenario. I am a sitting duck waiting for coronavirus to be brought into this crowded prison, where I will likely be infected and possibly killed. Yet every day, I still step out of my cell into the frontlines of this pandemic; regardless of this unforeseen killer, regardless of the thousands who have been infected in prisons and the hundreds who are dead. I still step out of my cell and take on the dangerous task of feeding the population so the guards can focus on maintaining safety and security.

It is very hurtful to me that my humanity is unseen because of the past wrongs I’ve done. It is difficult to see that the lives of my fellow incarcerated people are being thought of as unworthy of protection during this pandemic; that those incarcerated people who stand out on the frontlines providing essential services behind prison walls everyday are being forgotten.

There are incarcerated people who risk their lives every day to make sure that people get fed; we make sure the prison hospitals, kitchens, day rooms and showers are cleaned and sanitized. We make sure custody staff get their offices cleaned and paperwork filed on time. We prune flowers, water the grass, and trim the trees. We make sure that incarcerated people who are older and physically handicapped or hearing impaired receive care. We help mitigate this pandemic.

Many of us work for free or earn pennies on the dollar for our services. At the end of the day we are called animals and monsters; people too unfit for society. We are seen as just perpetrators of our past crimes even though many of us have undergone rigorous vocational, psychological and educational training in an effort to rehabilitate.

Many of us have been sentenced to life in prison and are now facing the possibility of death inside. But we continue trying to make amends for our past wrongs and reclaim our humanity. We haven’t given up on each other or our society. All we want is for society not to give up on us.

During this coronavirus pandemic, I believe the lives of those who are incarcerated should matter. But we continue trying to make amends for our past wrongs and reclaim our humanity. We haven’t given up on each other or our society. All we want is for society to give up on us.

During this coronavirus pandemic, I believe the lives of those who are incarcerated should matter. But we continue trying to make amends for our past wrongs and reclaim our humanity. We haven’t given up on each other or our society. All we want is for society not to give up on us.

Editor’s Note: Steve’s article arrived at the Oakland, Calif. offices of All of Us or None at a time when the air here is thick with smoke. COVID isn’t the first time our society has asked incarcerated people to risk their lives for the sake of others while denying any form of gratitude, monetary or otherwise. California’s prison brigades have been fighting wildfires here for pennies on the dollar and most will not be able to secure the occupational license necessary to become a firefighter once they are released. Whether it’s serving food in COVID incubators or fighting raging fires, prisoners do not receive standing ovations or tribute parades. Instead, they are treated as expendable.

Earlier this month, we were informed that the staff at Pleasant Valley State Prison evacuated, leaving the incarcerated population of nearly 2,500 souls to fend for themselves. This doesn’t just reflect a society that cannot recognize the humanity of its fellow citizens. It is a society that has lost a sense of humanity in itself.

All of Us or None chapters continue to hold #FreeThemAll protests around the country. We encourage family and friends to speak up and pressure local and state officials to expedite any and all decarceration efforts.

Find out how to get involved by contacting your local chapter head (listed on PAGE 12)
The letter pictured above and transcribed below is a firsthand account of life inside during the coronavirus pandemic. The letter is from Kelin D. Harris, an incarcerated writer at Kern Valley State Prison in California.

It is February 6, 2020. After three years of incarceration and zero disciplinary infractions, I have earned the right to walk away from the apogee of high-risk security and transfer to a lower security level prison. To calm myself, I decided not to count my eggs before they hatch, I still have to wait on a bus approved by Sacramento.

I can hardly concentrate as I explain to my bunkee (cellmate) what the correctional counselor was whispering through the cell door perforation. I imagine being in an ambulance -- a de facto commodity, being wheelchair bound while undergoing physical therapy from recent foot surgery -- taking in scenic views of the Grapevine [a winding stretch of Interstate 5 in the hills of San Joaquin Valley] and being closer to my two daughters.

I receive my ticket March 19, but because of the coronavirus pandemic (allegedly) no transfers are occurring. The people in power have issued a form of "social distancing," which includes segregating building houses from another during pill call and yard recreation. All visits have been cancelled, and our JPay emails from family and friends are not being printed in a timely manner. We've not been granted a kiosk and tablets, so we wait until the mailroom catches up on a backlog.

About a month after the pandemic is televised, my institution finally dispenses masks, but only to inmates that have asthma or who have valley fever. We were told, "If you lose it, another will not be given." I, in fact, lose mine and am denied another. From the instructions on the news, I create make-shift personal protection equipment out of my bandanna and some rubber bands.

There is no increase in the distribution of hygienic supplies in light of COVID-19. We're given 1 bar of (Prison Industrial Authority) soap; 1 toilet paper roll; "clean" laundry; 1 cup of disinfectant per request. This distribution is supposed to occur weekly, though many weeks it is not conducted at all. Over the course of two months, the response to the pandemic can be felt quantitatively. Now the entire population is given masks, manufactured from institution's livery scraps. By verbal mandate, we are not allowed outside our cells unless we have protective gear on. We are back on lockdown due to someone being killed on the recreational yard. There is no movement except critical kitchen workers. Every officer in tow resembles President Trump! They've taken no precautions and sometimes don't even wear latex gloves.

My bunkee is escorted in from his scullery position. We discuss everything under the sun, especially what's happening "beyond the Wall." I chime in on the gossip we're stringent on categorizing as "politics," separating propaganda from disinformation, while exchanging think-tank dialogue. One more associate was denied youth offender parole. He didn't have any meaningful education and trade, as far as they were concerned.

We discuss disapproval of the use of the word "flunky" to describe the prison's essential workers. We study the word's semantics and laugh out loud about its obvious etymology. We deliberate on the 13th Amendment. I premise, "In effect, the United States has been under martial law ever since Lincoln's administration."

Because there has been no access to the law library or the vocation and education departments for at least 10 weeks now, everyone has been ostracized from litigating and learning more about anti-recidivism and rehabilitation.

Our enemy uses silent weapons -- anti-subversion -- and keeps us on a strict need-to-know basis.

I sit in wait for my transfer and writ of habeas corpus pending in the California Supreme Court concerning my controlling prison sentence. Our enemy uses silent weapons -- anti-subversion -- and keeps us on a strict need-to-know basis, diversion producing apathy.

Supervisors are not training food handlers on augmenting cleaning routines in addition to understanding comprehensive food expiration and storage temperatures. This kind of tutelage would ensure a decrease in disease spreading. The "structure" is designed to make our reality like Auschwitz, with an oven closing in around us.

John Stuart Mill said, "No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible, until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought." This is an ultra important task in dire times as these. If neglected, we, as a society, will remain in some sort of prison.
Democracy’s Missing Voices

All of Us or None members talk voting rights

First, the bad news: The U.S. has denied the right to vote to 61 million Americans based on felony convictions. Disenfranchisement laws, designed during the Jim Crow era, silence millions, denying safety by incentivizing recidivism, and proliferate systemic racism in this country.

Here’s the good news: The momentum to end draconian disenfranchisement laws has never been greater. Since the 2018 passage of Amendment 4 in Florida, which restored the right to vote to 1.4 million formerly incarcerated people, 130 voting rights bills have been introduced in 30 state legislatures last year, and at least four of those states are considering allowing incarcerated people to vote.

The backbone of all these campaigns is the stories of the directly impacted. When everyday citizens realize contributing members of their communities are denied this most basic right, the choice to restore the right to vote becomes simple. Citizens choose people over politics.

As our California chapters push for the passage of Proposition 17, which would restore voting rights to 50,000 parolees if it wins a majority vote in the November election, we’ve asked our membership to share their stories. We hope you will read them and be moved to push for change in your community.

I never had the rights of most citizens. I never had the right to serve in the military, to buy alcohol. The rights most adults are able to exercise were taken away from me when I was 17, when I was convicted as an adult for a crime. Once again, old structures living out in modern times.

Some say slavery is over and has nothing to do with what’s happening today. This just isn’t true. My disenfranchisement stems from a law that started just after slavery when the South didn’t want ex-slaves voting against their interests. These ex-masters had laws passed to disenfranchise millions of former slaves, more radical than re-enslavement through vagrancy laws. Any breaking of a law, felonies specifically, took away a group of people’s political power to cast a vote toward their new, free future.

Now that I’m out of prison, I’m faced with a system however you can. That led to a job, a mission, in a movement to give voting rights to parolees. Now, with a team effort to pass Prop 17, we can gain the right to unify and cast a vote to our collective good. Voting to me is a symbol of freedom, the freedom to determine our own future.

William “Tarig” Palmer
Policy Fellow, AOUON National

Everyone should have voting rights, if for no other reason than taxation without representation: Everyone is required to pay taxes and it’s ridiculous to pay for politicians, whom you did not choose, to run your life.

It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. I’ve been working to Get Out The Vote since the ’70s and making sure people, my people, were registered to vote.

When I was released from prison, I gradually came to realize what life would be like for me and all other formerly incarcerated. But never have I been so disenfranchised as when I ran for Mayor of Peoria in ’99 and the Peoria School District in 2011. Even though Illinois has a statute on the books that restore a person’s right to vote and to file for a pardon that was submitted on January 15, 2020. We still wait with no answer, but it has not stopped me from lobbying, assisting with bills and policies and getting people to the polls. This fight for voter registration will continue as long as I have an opportunity to breathe air! FREEDOM!

Savvy Shabazz
President, AOUON Louisville

CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE
legislature to say otherwise, another law was passed denying them the right to vote if they still had unpaid fines and fees.

My point is this: “Those Closest To The Problem Are The Ones Closest To The Solution And Yet Are Kept Farthest From The Resources.” — Glenn Martin

So stand for your right to vote, but don’t stop there. It’s just as (or maybe more) important to be voted FOR! Fight for the right to vote and be voted for. Then hold those you voted for accountable.

General Parker
President, AOUON Central Illinois

Not being able to vote, it’s you’re just watching everything happen, things that affect you personally, and you have no say. If there’s something that affects me, I want to be able to have a say so in that. Not being able to have a say, it’s like being invisible. Like you don’t exist. How are you making these decisions and deciding things that affect my life? My happiness, my future without my input? That’s not right.

We understand the situations that caused us to be where we are (in prison), and we see the changes that need to happen to affect the next generation. Having a chance to vote and effect this change is important. Parole is supposed to be this thing that allows us to come back into society, to reintegrate with society. It’s supposed to assist us with reentry, not to cause us to feel more alienated. We want to be contributors and affect change, and we want our voices to matter. So having the right to vote is essential. We’re the ones who could bring the healing. We’re the ones who have the solutions, because we have been through the process. We have personally been affected by the system, by what’s happening already in society, and it needs to change.

Joseph

About the Artist: Feature Story Background

The background image for our feature article this month was painted by Mark Stanley-Bey, an artist incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California. It was created as part of the Arts in Corrections (AIC) program and specifically under the auspices of the William James Association’s “Prison Arts Project”, which was started in 1977. According to a description of the work, the piece took Mark over 1,000 hours and three-plus months to create. The image is entitled “Orisâa’s Rising.” Orisa, also spelled orika or orisha, is any of the deities of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. According to Nigerian scholar J. Omosade Awolalu, orishas fall into three categories -- primordial divinities, deified ancestors, and personified natural forces and phenomena -- although they often overlap.

The reason this image was chose for the feature on voting rights was because of the description of the deified ancestors category of Orisâa. Deified ancestors, according to Yoruba tradition, are people who lived in this world after it was created and had such a profound impact upon it that their descendants have continued to promote their memory. It is in this vein that the members of All of Us or None continue to come to the table and fight for the restoration of the rights that were wrongfully stripped from so many.
Editor's Note: The following is a dispatch from our Wisconsin Chapter President Caliph Muab-El. After Jacob Blake was shot by police on August 23, the AOUON Wisconsin Chapter, in partnership with The People's Revolution, a partner group that many All Of Us Or None Members belong to, kicked off demonstrations in Kenosha, where the incident had occurred. Blake, 29-year-old African American man, was shot over four times in the back by police officer Rusten Sheske just outside of the car where his children were inside. At the present time, he remains in the hospital shackled to a bed fighting for his life.

The Wisconsin AOUON members were marching peacefully alongside The People's Revolution on Tuesday, August 25, when they were ambushed by a white supremacist-led militia group. Minister Caliph's account of what transpired:

We are part of the longest running march in the country. We've had 91 days of protests and we're supporting people on the ground in partnership with The People's Revolution. We brought over 200 people from the city of Milwaukee to Kenosha when things began popping off there. On the first night we were there, a militia started spraying bleach on us from rooftops. We had black All Night we were there, a militia started spraying bleach from inside. At the present time, he remains in the hospital shackled to a bed fighting for his life.

We employed our defense unit the second night, and, the third night, that unit was dispatched to Madison by public officials because the militia was reportedly there. This wasn't the first time that public officials requested our security team to settle unrest and stop provocateurs from creating chaos. The rest of our people went to Kenosha.

We got a call while we were in Madison that our people had been shot on the ground and one of our medics was shot while trying to aid and assist someone that was injured. They nearly blew his arm off. Then the militia proceeded to snatch our people up. They snatched up two of our people and stuffed them into black vans. We didn't know who it was at the time because we're on the ground with people who look like allies, but they're enemies amongst us.

They slashed tires on about 20 cars from our group so that our people were trapped in a battlezone with no way out. We rushed back over four times in the back by police officer Rusten Sheske just outside of the car where his children were inside. At the present time, he remains in the hospital shackled to a bed fighting for his life.

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They slashed tires on about 20 cars from our group so that our people were trapped in a battlezone with no way out. We rushed back from Madison and headed to Kenosha to help the people who couldn't get out. The two people who were abducted were eventually found. The militia had beat them up real bad and dumped them on the side of the road. The person who was shot is in recovery and it looks like he is not going to lose his arm. The militia also killed two people.

We have to organize to a completely different way. We stopped people from going into Kenosha so that we can regroup and organize and gather resources. We're raising money to pay for medical, tires, food, water, safety gear, Transportation and an emergency fund so that we can be prepared when tragedy hits again, as well as the expenses incurred in this last massacre and we're restricting people from going into Kenosha until further notice. We are marching again Saturday and we will have security on the ground.

Support is appreciated. We are collecting donations at www.wiaouon.org/donate and we're asking people to get the word out about what's happening here.

It's All of Us… OR NONE!

(VOICES -- continued from PAGE 7)

My name is Henry Ortiz. I served 18 years in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. During my incarceration, I obtained my high school diploma, three vocational trade certificates, and a college degree, but I can't vote. Since my release, I facilitated healing with over 2,500 men to gain insight into the causative factors of their criminal behavior. I've done community fundraisers and all I could do to make amends to the community, but I still can't vote. I paid my restitution and I work as a community organizer for All Of Us Or None, helping those impacted by incarceration, and even though I pay taxes, I still can't vote. I've also advocated for criminal justice reform bills and have obeyed all the laws while being on parole, but I still can't vote.

There's a lot of criminal justice laws that impact people like me, but my voice and first hand knowledge are ignored in the country's most democratic process because I can't vote. In order to improve the circumstances of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people we need the opportunity to vote. Please support us by voting yes on Prop 17.

Henry Ortiz
Organizer, AOUON Sacramento

While on parole from 2015 to 2016, I was unable to vote despite being involved in much needed campaigns to remove systemic barriers for formerly incarcerated people, including bail reform by which I was personally impacted.

Not only did I not have the chance to express my human and civilian right and duty to "voice" my values electorally, but, as a single father of two minor sons, I was prevented from being a voice for them as well.

John Jones III
Dir. of Community and Political Engagement
Just Cities

Voting is a critical right for ALL Americans. The most vital part a citizen can play in a democracy is to exercise their right to vote. Disenfranchisement not only relegates citizens into second class citizens but discourages the most impacted individuals from participating in our democracy.

Noe Gudino
B. Political Science '20, LSPC Policy Fellow '18

I am 62 years of age and I have never had an opportunity to vote in any presidential election in my life because I've always been on probation and state parole. The right to vote is very important for me. It would allow me an opportunity to vote myself on matters that can affect my life.

Ali Brits
Organizer, AOUON National

My name is Dominic Davis. I’m a mother, a student and a social worker, a taxpayer and a community organizer. I’m also formerly incarcerated. I believe it’s important that people who are formerly incarcerated and, specifically, people who are on parole have the right to vote because I feel like it’s crucial returning citizens have a voice in our communities.

I enjoy being part of the voting process as a formerly incarcerated person because it gives me an opportunity to be heard. I have a voice and I can vote for positive change that ultimately affects my family and my community.

There are already so many boundaries as someone who is a returning citizen coming back into society: boundaries to my employment, or my ability to travel to certain places can be an issue, even having to have supervision once completing my time-served. Not being able to vote is just another barrier and that would make me feel like I’m not a part of my community.

Dominic Davis
September 2020

Bill Watch

California

• Voting Rights for People On Parole (McCarty) ACA 6 / AB 646 PASSED THE RESTORATION OF VOTING RIGHTS FOR 50K PEOPLE ON PAROLE WILL NOW BE ON THE NOVEMBER BALLOT. Go to freethevote2020.org for more.
• Debt Free California (Mitchell) SB 144 would build on the recent decisions of individual counties (such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Alameda) to end the collection of certain court and probation fees by repealing state law authorizing specified criminal justice fees.

Idaho

• Clean Slate (Rubel and Lent) [number pending] would allow individuals with felony convictions for nonviolent and nonsexual crimes to petition the courts to seal their public records. Individuals applying for sealed records would need to have served their whole sentence and have not reoffended in the three years following their release.

Illinois

• Felony-Murder Rule Reform (Slaughter and Peters) HB1615/SB2292 would ensure only those directly accountable for a death are charged with first-degree murder.
• Right to Vote (Ford) HB4377/HJRCA33, a bill and constitutional amendment, would ensure incarcerated people would be able to vote.

Kentucky

• Kentucky Voting Rights (Higdon) SB62 would amend the Constitution of Kentucky to grant persons convicted of a felony other than a sex offense, a violent offense, or an offense against a child, the right to vote five years after completion of sentence. This bill passed the Senate but was not voted on by the House before the end of the 2020 session.

Missouri

• Fresh Start Act (Koenig) SB 647 would require that no person shall be disqualified from pursuing, practicing, or engaging in any occupation for which a license is required solely or in part because of a prior conviction of a crime, unless the crime for which an applicant was convicted directly relates to the duties and responsibilities for the licensed occupation.
• Death Penalty With Mental Illness (Hannegan) HB 1756 would prohibit the execution of any person found to have suffered from a serious mental illness at the time of the offense for which they are accused.

New Jersey

• Slavery Exemption (Rice and Cunningham) SRC 96 is a proposed amendment to the state constitution that would prohibit slavery or involuntary servitude in New Jersey prisons.
• No For-Profit Prisons (Verrelli) A 816 would prohibit DOC and other public entities from contracting with for-profit, private correctional facilities.

New York

• Mental Health Bail Reform (Kaplan) S7242 would establish a pretrial mental health and substance abuse services bail fund.
• Voting Rights (Parker) S 6821 would require the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, in collaboration with the state and county boards of election, to establish a program to facilitate inmate voter registration and voting.

North Carolina

• The Second Chance Act (Britt, Daniel and McKissick) H 874 would set up automatic expungement for people who are found not guilty or have charges against them dismissed after July 1, 2020, and allow people to petition for the expunction of nonviolent misdemeanor and felony charges after a period of good behavior.

Pennsylvania

• Probation Reform (Williams) SB 14 would reform how long Pennsylvanians stay on probation and the time served in prison for probation violations. It also specifies that a court may not impose a sentence of probation consecutive to another sentence of probation.

Vote YES on CA Proposition 17 this November and restore voting rights to 50K Californians on parole

free the vote 2020.org
By Cole M. Bienek

Parole in the age of COVID means sitting inside Receiving & Release and waiting for the results of a rapid test. Even though the nurse said I would be released even if I tested positive, I didn’t really believe her. I still wore prison blues, was still surrounded by death fences and razor wire, was still sitting on a scared and somber wooden prison bench. I had already told myself I wouldn’t believe it until I was in my mom’s arms.

I cried when they called me, handed me my papers, and told me to go. Crying seemed appropriate. The only things I left with: a single, clear plastic tub and my time-worn guitar, barely appropriate. The only things I left with: a single, my papers, and told me to go. Crying seemed like I’d heard for years, the world was all new--like I’d never been there.


The new car smell doesn’t really wear off. Just like I’d heard for years, the world was all new--mostly shiny and amazing. The trees fascinated me. It hit me that nobody was coming to help me. Who knew what to do, that I was new. She gave me an odd look, shrugged her shoulders and walked me through the process.

I don’t walk around with a sign saying, “Hey! I just got out of the joint after 32 years, and I don’t know sh*t,” but I will ask for help and cut through the confused stares by saying I was just released, and I need some help knowing what to do. So far, one hundred percent of the time, people smile, say welcome home, and go out of their way to help me.

Preparation inside is key. Not just the obvious stuff like becoming employable, but the subtle stuff like learning to tolerate things you don’t like or don’t agree with. I promise you this: if you learn how to get along with people, they will accept you. I promise you this: if you learn how to get along with people, they will accept you.

Cole

Cole Bienek edited a newspaper when he was incarcerated. Now, he writes a firsthand experience of the methods being used by the criminal legal system to control him as a parolee. Photos courtesy Cole M. Bienek.

Nothing was wrong with me. I was having the same reaction to being in the world as I did when I returned from extended periods in the SHU. It wore off.

After I gave them one negative COVID test, I was allowed to leave the motel to go to the store. I talked the nurse into letting me go for a long walk, and I headed off with Siri directing my steps. That first day I walked 11 miles and bought a $4 cup of coffee. It seemed odd to me that nobody knew I’d just gotten out of prison. After decades of wearing the uniform, I was just as anonymous as everyone else. A very good feeling indeed.

I have three bits of advice for long-termers. First, DO take advantage of every opportunity to become familiar with technology while you are inside. It is impossible for me to stress enough how much tech has infiltrated life. Two, be prepared for a slow reentry process. Government agencies operate at their own speed. An addendum to number two: While you are inside, do what you can to get the process started to have access to a certified birth certificate. You need that to get the ball rolling. Third, and most importantly, bring your humility with you. I have found asking for help opens doors. I never used a debit card at checkout in a supermarket before, so I told the cashier I didn’t know what to do, that I was new. She gave me an odd look, shrugged her shoulders and walked me through the process.

Freedom is beautiful, yet reality demands attention. There are a litany of tasks to be accomplished, and none of them happen according to my timeline. California ID, Social Security Card, Certified Birth Certificate, Medi-Cal, meet with a parole agent, get some clothes and hygiene supplies, intake into a transitional house, groups and programs, and other things I simply took for granted -- like food and laundry.

Like many other paroled lifers, I was required to report to transitional housing -- not a problem. I welcomed the help and the six months of free rent.

I was slated to parole to Los Angeles; however, at the last moment I was redirected to San Francisco -- L.A. was closed, they said. They placed me in a residential substance abuse treatment house, in a room with seven roommates, confined with a combination of people in various stages of detox and a couple other recently paroled former lifers.

We were all on “Observation” for COVID; we had to provide three consecutive negative tests before we were allowed to enter the main program, a process that typically took two weeks. It was eerily similar to all the different times I was placed on orientation that typically took two weeks. It was eerily similar to all the different times I was placed on orientation.

One day before being released into the house, a young man passed through who later tested positive for COVID. Citing an abundance of caution, the young man passed through who later tested positive for COVID. Citing an abundance of caution, the young man passed through who later tested positive for COVID. Citing an abundance of caution, the young man passed through who later tested positive for COVID. Citing an abundance of caution, the young man passed through who later tested positive for COVID.

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Preparation inside is key. Not just the obvious stuff like becoming employable, but the subtle stuff like learning to tolerate things you don’t like or don’t agree with. I promise you this: if you learn how to get along inside, learn to respect other people of all shapes, sizes, sexual orientation, religion, culture, etc., you will have a much easier time of it on the outside.
**Coronavirus Resources**

Supporting directly and system-impacted people during crisis: https://www.beyond-prisons.com/covid19

Safety Manuals for individuals in state, federal and California correctional facilities: prisonerswithchildren.org/Coronavirus


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**JOIN Participatory Defense**

**ON ZOOM**

**Link:** https://bit.ly/2tzjE5r

**Password:** #MWCU

Every Friday 6PM-7PM

A community organizing model for people facing charges, and to help communities impact the outcomes of cases and transform the landscape of power in the courtroom.

**Prop 20 Is Designed to Erase Our Progress**

- Turns some misdemeanors into felonies (Prop 47 Rollback)
- Prevents many incarcerated people from earning credits from rehabilitative programs (Prop 57 Rollback)
- Returns people to jail for minor probation violations (AB 199 Rollback)

**Prop 20 Will Cost Taxpayers an Additional 50 Billion By 2025**

**Does That Sound Like A Responsible Budget To You?**

**No on Prop 20**

curbprisonspending.org

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**Our State Constitutions Are Not Symbolic Documents, They Are Living Documents That Form The Basis For All Of Our Laws. The Language That Remains In Our Constitutions Permitting Slavery Is Immoral And We Must Remove It.**

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**Abolish Slavery National Network**

Join the national movement to end slavery in America.

Learn more at abolishslavery.us

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Nearly 50,000 Californians on parole pay taxes at the local, state, and federal levels. However, they are not able to vote in local, state, or federal elections. That can change by voting YES on Proposition 17 this November.

**Free the Vote 2020**

freethevote2020.org

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**Save the Date!!**

**Investing in Our Health: A Youth Led Platica**

**A Virtual Town Hall**

**Friday, September 4th 2020 6-7:30PM**

Mental Health • Education • Food Justice

Register Here: https://bit.ly/2xzdtx2

Spanish translation will be available

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**All of Us or None**

Monthly Virtual Membership Meeting

**Every Third Thursday**

6:30pm to 8:30pm PT

https://ispc.zoom.us/j/92683469000
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Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)