

*Comments made by James Keown, Vice-Chair of Lifers' Group Inc. and a prisoner serving Life Without Parole, at a January 13, 2020 forum organized and hosted by MCI-Norfolk's African American Coalition Committee featuring a delegation led by US Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley that comprised members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Massachusetts legislators, the Suffolk County Sheriff, and the Suffolk County District Attorney.*

Good morning. I would like to begin by thanking MCI-Norfolk's African American Cultural Coalition both for coordinating today's event and for allowing me the opportunity to speak. And, I would like to thank each of you for coming here today to be with us and for your commitment to progressive policies.

My name is James Keown. I serve as the vice-chairman of Lifers Group Inc., a prisoner-run organization formed in 1974 to help those serving life and long term sentences. I am also a prisoner sentenced to Life Without Parole.

Today, I would like to talk for a few minutes about Life Without Parole. In Massachusetts 1084 women and men are serving Life Without Parole. In short, what this means, is that almost 1100 people are destined to spend the rest of their lives in prison. No matter how much these people change during their incarceration, no matter how remorseful they are for what they have done, 1084 women and men are serving a sentence that is functionally equivalent to death by incarceration. The people on this "virtual death row" come from all walks of life. But like most people ensnared in the American criminal punishment system, most of those condemned to die in prison come from poorer communities, had less educational and economic opportunities, and more often than not are people of color.

If recent trends hold up, at least twelve prisoners serving Life in Massachusetts will die this year behind the walls. The state does not use traditional killing methods such as lethal injection or the gas chamber. Instead, the Commonwealth utilizes the deadliest and cruelest cocktail available to carry out terminal sentences. Policies and time mix to administer the state's de facto death sentence: Life Without Parole.

Massachusetts is second in the nation in the percentage of prisoners sentenced to Life Without Parole. Only Louisiana sentences a higher percentage of people to death by incarceration. In real numbers, Massachusetts has more people serving Life Without Parole than all the other New England states combined. There are 809 more people sentenced to Life Without Parole in Massachusetts than in New York, even though the prison population of New York is six times larger. Each of the 1084 people sentenced to Life Without Parole in Massachusetts, people like me, like many of us in this auditorium today, like 33 percent of the people in this prison, will die inside of these walls under current policies.

Opponents of reform measures, like Massachusetts Senate bill 826 and House Bill 3358, which provides every prisoner with a meaningful parole opportunity after 25 years, say that it is far too dangerous to allow first-degree lifers out of prison. But we need only look to the Massachusetts juveniles who were sentenced originally to Life Without Parole who have been released over the past few years. Not one has returned to prison for a new crime of any kind. Others opposed say that those serving Life Without Parole should stay in prison because those sentenced committed the most heinous crimes. Again, the facts reveal something different. The biggest difference between many of those serving Life Without Parole and those who are eligible for release is not in the crime committed, but it is in the decision to go to

trial. In fact, in this auditorium today are people who never killed anyone – those who were charged under joint venture/felony murder and who will spend the rest of their lives in prison even though the actual “shooters” have been released under plea deals.

Those of you who serve in Washington, D.C. may be asking what you can do to help. After all, state sentencing is a state issue. There are two particular ways that come to mind where we ask you to help in eliminating Life Without Parole in Massachusetts. One is to use your platform, your political capital, to speak on this issue and to support state elected officials and candidates in Massachusetts who believe in the abolition of Life Without Parole. Two is to create incentives for Massachusetts to change, such as the measures outlined in Congresswoman Pressley’s HR 702. Sponsor initiatives that allow funding to flow to Massachusetts that support overhauling the state’s sentencing and parole system. And provide funding to address the special needs of those who have served decades in prison and are preparing to return to society.

I close today with the words of lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson, who answered an interviewer’s questions recently with this quote: “No person is the worst thing they have done.” Stevenson’s phrase serves as a rallying cry for those of us advocating to end Life Without Parole. It our sincere hope that you will help us create a future where Life Without Parole is abolished; a future where every person in prison has a meaningful opportunity to demonstrate their readiness to return to society; a future where change and remorse are valued over vengeance and punishment.