



REINSTATING PAROLE FOR "FISHBACK INMATES"

PICTURED LEFT: SENATOR JOE MORRISSEY AND THE LOHM NATIONAL ADVOCATE, KAREN MORRISON



In 1995, the former Governor of Virginia, George Allen, eradicated parole in the interest of “truth in sentencing.” In the five years following the legislative change, jurors were not informed that parole had been abolished. Subsequently, they recommended lengthy sentences under the pretense that individuals were likely to be released on parole. In the June 2000 case Richard Fishback v. Commonwealth, the Supreme Court declared that it “defies reason” to not inform jurors that parole had been eradicated. However, the rule did not apply retroactively to cases tried during 1995 and 2000.

For many years now, politicians have been fighting for “Fishback inmates’ to be eligible for parole. In February 2020, a major breakthrough occurred in Virginia when the Parole Fishback Eligibility Bill, passed the Senate. Governor Ralph Northam supports the bill and will sign it into law if it passes the House. The Fishback Legislation will apply to approximately 300 people. However, those sentenced of capital murder between 1995-2000 will not eligible for parole.

Karen Morrison, who is the National Advocate for The Ladies of Hope Ministries (LOHM) program, The Parole and Probation Accountability Project (PPAP), has been advocating on the ground for the passage of the bill. In 2019, Morrison discovered that Virginia did not have parole and partnered with the criminal justice reform organization #cut50, to host a National Day of Empathy in order to spread awareness. Shortly after, she became an advocate for Daniel Ford, who was sentenced to 35 years in prison for less than five grams of crack. His jurors were not informed that parole had been abolished. Daniel's attorney filed a pardon with the Governor's office but it wasn't approved.

Morrison remained determined and decided to expand her advocacy to include legislative reform. She sat on a parole committee with Senator McClellan, attended a Senate hearing on the legislation and began communicating with Ms. Lillie Branch-Kennedy, the founder of RIHD Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised. With the recent legislative advancement and sustained grassroots efforts, Morrison is optimistic that the “Fishback inmates” will get the second chance they deserve.