

WOMEN'S CLEMENCY INITIATIVE

A REPORT ON LIBERATING LONG-SERVING WOMEN



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**American
Friends
Service
Committee**

FOREWORD

I have spent years working with women serving life and long sentences in Michigan—sitting across from them in workshops, walking alongside them as they prepare for parole and commutation, and witnessing the daily, often unseen work of transformation. This report is not simply a collection of data or policy recommendations. It is grounded in a shared responsibility and a clear belief that Michigan can—and must—do better.

The story we tell about punishment in this state is incomplete. We are told that long sentences create safety and that people who have caused harm must be removed for as long as possible. What is missing from that narrative is context—particularly the context of women’s lives. Many women enter the legal system after years of violence, coercion, poverty, and survival. These realities are routinely ignored in courtrooms, policy decisions, and systems that claim to deliver justice.

This report names that absence of context. It also names something else too often overlooked: transformation.

The women I have worked with are not the same people they were decades ago. They have built communities of care inside prison—mentoring, facilitating programs, resolving conflict, and supporting one another through profound loss and joy. They have earned degrees, developed skills, and committed themselves to growth in environments that often undermine it. They have done this work without any guarantee of release, in a system that frequently signals their transformation does not matter.

That contradiction—between who people become and what the system recognizes or ignores—is central to this report.

Michigan’s constitution promises rehabilitation, yet the state continues to prioritize punishment over meaningful pathways to release. Nearly a third of people in Michigan prisons are serving life or long sentences, and nearly 11 percent of incarcerated women are serving life sentences. While the overall prison population declined by approximately 36 percent between 2006 and 2024, women have not experienced the same decarceration trends. Many have been left behind—aging, overlooked, and disproportionately women of color.

For women, the consequences of extreme punishment are distinct.

Black women are significantly over-represented among those serving the longest sentences. Their experiences of violence—before and during incarceration—are compounded by a system that rarely recognizes them as survivors. Instead, their lives are filtered through narrow legal frameworks that fail to account for gendered harm. Even emerging avenues for relief, such as age-based resentencing, often exclude women by failing to account for the different timelines that shape their lives. Timelines often mired with complex trauma histories, valiant efforts of resilience and chronic struggle.

The failures of the system are also evident in the commutation process. Women prepare extensively—developing release plans, gathering support, and reflecting deeply on their actions—yet often receive “no merit” decisions with no explanation or transparency. As this report shows, the process remains misaligned with its purpose, emphasizing past harm over present transformation.

That is not what mercy should look like.

Clemency exists to correct excessive punishment and recognize rehabilitation. Yet it has become increasingly rare and politicized, limiting one of the state’s most important tools for addressing injustice.

This report is an invitation to do collective accountability work and to right the failures of our communities and state systems.

This report offers a different approach—one grounded in evidence and lived experience. It calls for prioritizing long-serving women, incorporating trauma-informed review, increasing transparency, and shifting the burden to the state to demonstrate current risk of the people held under its control. It further outlines a clear path forward: establishing a presumption of review and release for women who have served decades—particularly those 45 and older with 20 or more years served; centering trauma, health, and gender-responsive factors in decision-making; implementing timely, transparent review processes with defined standards; and creating survivor-informed, community-based review structures that assess who a person is today, not only the circumstances of their conviction.

These are practical and necessary changes.

None of us are separate from the conditions that produce harm. The same systems that fail women before they enter prison—systems that inadequately respond to community violence that then fail to provide resources for healing, and that criminalize survival—are the systems we all live within. Accountability, therefore, cannot rest solely on individuals who have been incarcerated. It must also include a willingness to examine the role of the state and our communities in shaping those conditions. There is a window of time—right now—for meaningful change. Women at Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility have articulated a clear, phased vision for clemency and release—one that would transform lives while strengthening communities across Michigan. Their solutions are included in this report.

This report is an invitation to do collective accountability work and to right the failures of our communities and state systems.

By prioritizing meaningful review and release for women who have served decades—many of whom are survivors of profound violence and have demonstrated sustained transformation—the state can begin to correct deep gender and racial disparities embedded within its system of punishment, while also extending that same principle to elderly people who have served extreme terms of incarceration. Centering women in this moment is both necessary and overdue. It is a concrete step toward a more just and responsive system—one that recognizes the full context of women’s lives, affirms the possibility of change, and creates real pathways home.

– **Natalie Holbrook-Combs**

*Director, Michigan Criminal Justice Project
American Friends Service Committee*

INTRODUCTION

REALIGNING STATE POWER WITH MICHIGAN'S VALUES

Despite Michigan's constitutional promise of rehabilitation, the state has concentrated its power on punishment rather than prevention, care, or repair (Bernstein & Shapiro 2024) (reaffirmed by MI Supreme Court 2025). Michigan now spends more than four times as much per person to incarcerate as it invests per K-12 student—a stark signal of priorities that emphasize punishment over

Too many people—especially women—move from early victimization, lifelong exposure to abuse and neglect, and living in persistent survival mode to criminalization.

safety (House and Senate Fiscal Agencies, MDOC and School Aid 2025-26). It is critical to remember up front that there is no evidence to support the commonly held belief that extreme sentences make our communities safer or less susceptible to violent crime (NIJ 2016).

Over the last decade, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) has worked to parole people more readily when they first become eligible for release. Michigan went from a record high of 51,000 people in prison in 2006 to approximately 33,000 people in 2025. This is a great reduction in the number of people incarcerated in Michigan's state prisons.

And still, there are way too many people serving life and long-term sentences* in

Michigan—nearly a third of all currently incarcerated people. This report examines these high numbers and the extremeness of these sentences with an explicit and intentional focus on women serving long sentences. The imbalance of perpetual punishment over rehabilitation, freedom, and community safety and repair has predictable consequences. Too many people—especially women—move from early victimization, lifelong exposure to abuse and neglect, and living in persistent survival mode to criminalization.

Women's histories of trauma are ignored in homes, schools, relationships, and finally in courtrooms where survival and protection-driven actions are stripped of context.



*For purposes of this report long-term sentences are all 20 or more-year minimums.

If Michigan is serious about building safe and thriving communities, then the state must play a different role. The state cannot continue to perpetually punish people and elevate “perfect victims”—i.e. non-criminalized survivors of harm—as the rationale

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for extreme punishment policies while ignoring criminalized survivors of harm who have also been involved in causing harm in their communities. The state/community should be committed to preventing, interrupting, and repairing all harm, not just the harm caused to these “perfect” victims (Goodmark 2023).

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The broader use of clemency, especially for focused groups of people who are often overlooked and consequently more severely and disparately impacted, can also serve as an example to decision makers and the public that death by incarceration should not be a given upon the use of life and long indeterminate sentences.

Rather, Michigan needs more robust policies and practices that allow people to demonstrate their changed and changing selves and that uphold the Michigan constitutional standard of rehabilitation that is directly linked to physical freedom from confinement.



WHAT IS CLEMENCY?

Clemency is a constitutional power of the governor of the state of Michigan. It is a broad and potentially sweeping power.

Clemency includes *commutation*, *reprieve*, and *pardon*, three distinct acts of mercy.

It is critical to address that clemency was used often and regularly to release people from long sentences in Michigan for the duration of this executive tool. It is only in recent decades that clemency became politicized to the point of much less frequent use.

- This report's focus is on recommendations regarding the act of commutation.
- Further, the focus of this report is on long-serving women more broadly and long-serving elderly men.

COMMUTATION, REPRIEVE AND PARDON

Commutation reduces a sentence and makes a person eligible for parole. This offers a person, who might otherwise be forced to remain in prison forever, an outdate to be released from prison. A person who receives this act of mercy must be under state supervision for four years to complete their parole.

Reprieve temporarily delays punishment through a suspension of sentence.

Pardon erases the conviction and restores any rights that may have been removed due to the criminal conviction.

MICHIGAN'S OVER-RELIANCE ON EXTREME PUNISHMENT

Michigan is an outlier when it comes to extreme sentencing patterns. Nearly a third of people in its prisons have already served more than ten years, far above national norms (AFSC 2024). More than 4,200 people have served at least twenty years, with nearly half of those individuals surpassing thirty years served. Around 4,349 people — nearly 14% percent of those incarcerated — are serving life sentences, up from 8% percent in 1990. Michigan now has the fifth-largest population of those serving life without parole in the country (The Sentencing Project), a figure that grew fivefold between 1980 and 2020 (Bernstein & Shapiro 2024).

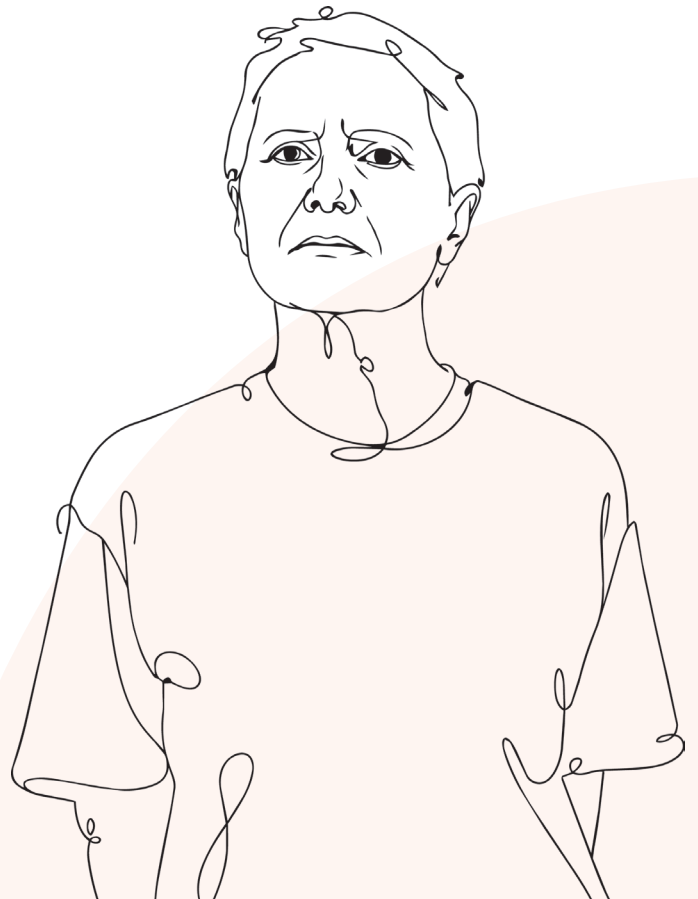
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This pattern sits uneasily with the state constitution, which has prohibited punishments that are “cruel or unusual” since 1850 — a deliberately broader protection than the federal Eighth Amendment (Bernstein & Shapiro 2024). Michigan’s courts have long read that clause to require proportionality and to honor the state’s traditional goal of rehabilitation (Bernstein & Shapiro 2024).

Historically, the use of clemency and parole in Michigan functioned as safeguards against perpetual punishment. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, judges, prosecutors, and communities often supported commutation when rehabilitation was clearly demonstrated (Bernstein

& Shapiro 2024; AFSC historical research—Romney Memo).

In the 1940s–1960s, parole and corrections officials typically recommended commuting life sentences after 20–25 years where rehabilitation was evident. When the governor stopped routinely accepting those recommendations by the late 1960s, the Director of the Michigan Department of Corrections petitioned for a return to honoring Michigan’s rehabilitative commitments (AFSC & U-M Ford School 2023). The “tough-on-crime” turn of the 1980s and 1990s then cemented truth-in-sentencing and “life means life,” practices in the executive branch, producing today’s constitutionally suspect status quo under the cruel or unusual standard (Bernstein & Shapiro 2024).



THE UNHEALTHY NATURE OF PRISON

Prisons in Michigan are not neutral. They are unhealthy environments that erode physical and mental health. As of June 2025, Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility—the state’s only women’s prison—reported a 33% vacancy rate across its workforce, one of the highest in the system (MDOC 2025).

These vacancies cause obstacles in access to programs, healthcare, visitation and safety for incarcerated individuals and staff. While the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) has made strides to implement more post-secondary educational programs in deep partnership with various community colleges as well as state and private universities, the staffing crisis creates unneeded barriers to education programs and impacts the positive cultural changes that are occurring because of better educational opportunities.

Throughout Michigan’s prison system, over 10,000 people are barred from core rehabilitative programming until they are within two years of release—signaling to long-serving people that although the although the system itself is referred to as a “corrective” institution, transformation is neither expected nor supported (AFSC 2024).

While the MDOC has made efforts to waive long serving people into some programs before the two-year release threshold, the staffing shortages and the lack of meaningful opportunities for freedom means that resources are prioritized for those serving shorter sentences rather than for those with long time and no release dates.

This leads to an activities and programs desert for long-serving women. Without the

powerful introduction of College in Prison through Eastern Michigan University and Jackson College, the over 500 women serving 15 years or more in Michigan’s prisons would have little access to any state run programs and only some access to volunteer run programs. Still these programs do not reach the bulk of long-serving women.

In Neal v. Michigan Department of Corrections, incarcerated women at Scott Correctional facility (now closed and torn down) reported pervasive sexual abuse and harassment by MDOC staff. Throughout the 1990s, nearly two hundred allegations surfaced at a single prison, implicating roughly 30% of male staff and leading to a \$100 million settlement (Neal v. MDOC; Prison Legal News 2009).

Even eating in prison is punitive. Prison food is high in processed carbohydrates, salt, and sugar, and low in protein and fresh produce. Nationally, three in four incarcerated people reported being served spoiled food (Impact Justice 2020). Incarceration itself is associated with shortened life expectancy (Widra 2023).

The prison environment is also violent.

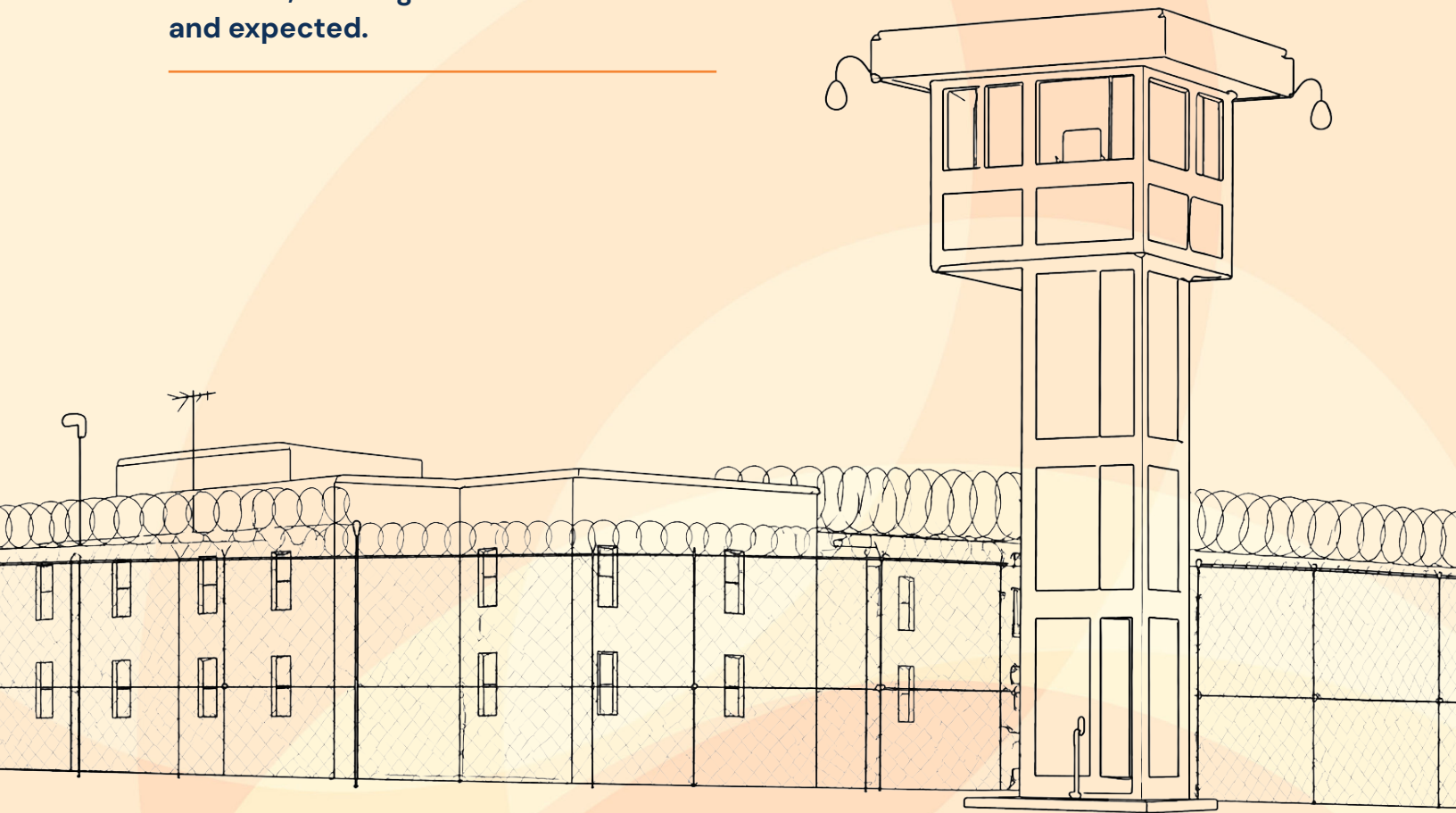
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staff and leading to a \$100 million settlement (Neal v. MDOC; Prison Legal News 2009).

While the MDOC made some sweeping changes following the lawsuit—like removing all men from housing units at the women’s facility—the very violent nature of prison has never been fully investigated, addressed, or systematically transformed from a place where abuse, isolation, and neglect are normalized and expected.

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Therefore, abuse persists. In June 2025, Newsweek reported staff at Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility illegally filmed incarcerated women in states of undress (Newsweek 2025). Strip-searching practices function as state-inflicted sexual assault (Hutchison 2019). While the state may contest this argument, the reality is this—making a person strip completely and have their body inspected for “contraband” after every visit with their loved ones, every shift that they work (for prisoner observation aides for example), and every medical procedure performed outside of the facility is abusive and trauma inducing.



LONG PUNISHMENT HARMS CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES

The harms of long incarceration extend well beyond prisons. When people are sentenced to decades inside, their children, families, and communities carry the weight of their absence.

CHILDREN

Parental incarceration undermines a child’s emotional stability, physical health, educational attainment, and financial security (NIJ 2011). Nationally, more than half of women in prison are mothers, and nearly two-thirds have children under 18. At arrest, close to 60% were primary caregivers (PPI 2022; Sentencing Project 2024; ACLU 2024). Separation often forces grandparents or relatives to assume care, with a measurable share of children entering foster or institutional placements (BJS 2010).

FAMILIES

Incarceration cuts household earnings nearly in half, contributing to an estimated \$350 billion in lost earnings nationally each year (FWD.us 2025) In addition to this, families often must shoulder legal, travel, and communication costs while managing caregiving alone. It is estimated that people with an incarcerated loved one spend \$4,200 a year on communications alone (FWD.us 2025)

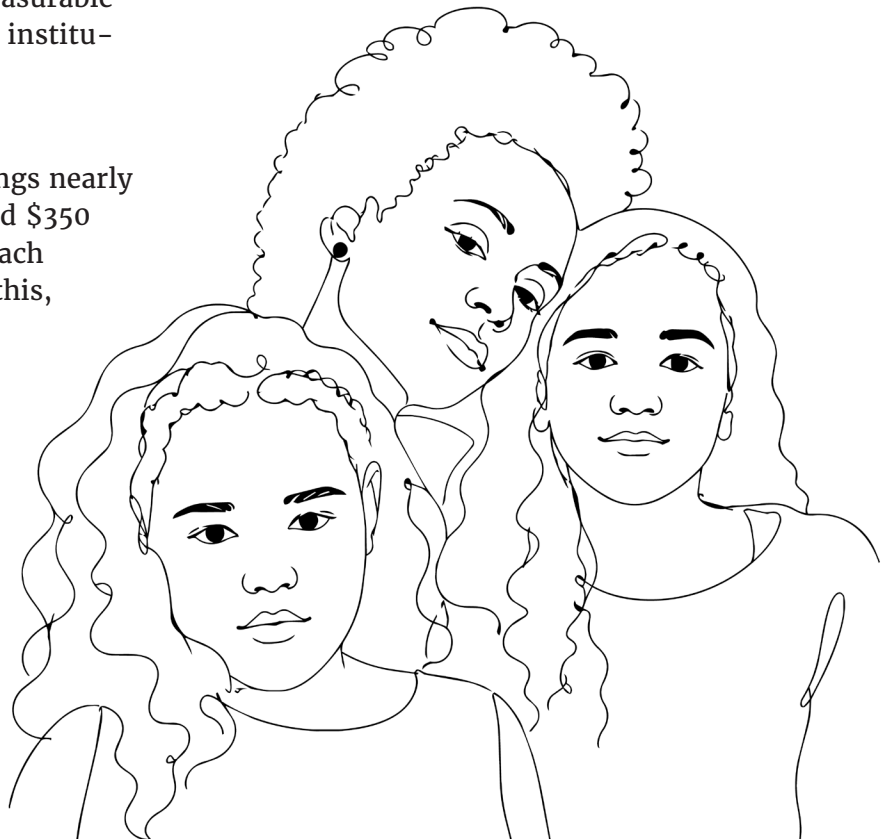
COMMUNITIES

High incarceration rates diminish social trust and civic participation while magnifying intergenerational harm (Sentencing Project

2022). In Michigan, the average term among the longest-serving people rose from 10 years (1989) to 26 years (2017)—deepening community disruption (Safe & Just Michigan 2019).

MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL HARM

Half of people behind bars have complex mental health needs and disorders; women experience PTSD at rates up to five times higher than the general population, compounding grief, anxiety, and spiritual loss across families and neighborhoods (Beck et al. 2013; Prison Policy Initiative, 2017 synthesis).



GENDER AND RACE MATTERS

Black women make up approximately 13.7% of Michigan’s population, yet they account for 43.5% of women serving life and long sentences—a more than threefold over-representation. This disparity is not only a reflection of broader incarceration trends; it reveals a deeper pattern in which race and gender converge to shape who receives the harshest punishment. Even within the prison system itself, the disparity intensifies: Black women comprise 35.4% of women in Michigan’s prisons but 43.5% of those serving life sentences, while white women make up 57.3% of the prison population and 51.3% of those serving the most extreme sentences.

While women make up a small fraction of the prison population overall, Black women are disproportionately concentrated at the highest levels of sentencing severity.

In contrast, white women—who make up the majority of the state’s population—are underrepresented among women serving life sentences. These patterns point to a system of punishment that is, again, not neutral and far from just, but one that systematically channels Black women into the most extreme forms of incarceration, often without recognition of the gendered and survival-based contexts that shape their pathways into the legal system.

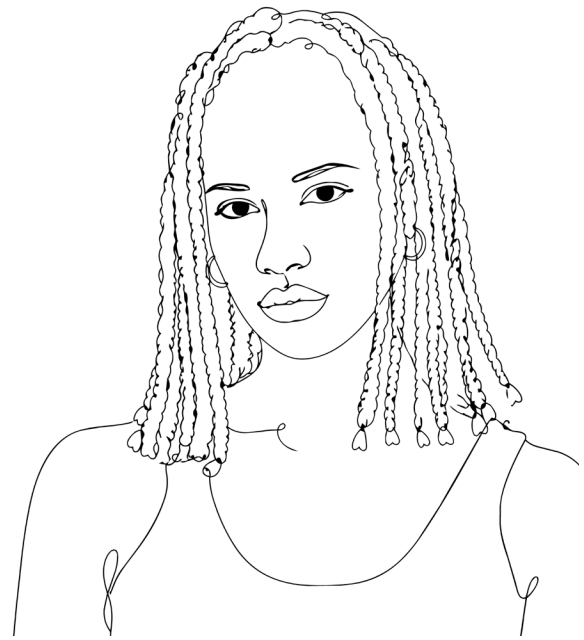


THE GENDERED IMPACT OF LONG SENTENCES ON WOMEN

Up to 90% of women in prison are survivors of sexual or physical violence (ACLU 2014; USSCCR 2020). Many were criminalized for survival-based acts—defending themselves against abusers, acting under coercion, or navigating survival economies (NCDBW 2018). Once inside, long sentences are uniquely destructive: incarceration accelerates aging by 10–15 years; a woman in her mid-40s inside often exhibits the health profile of someone a decade older in the community (Aday & Farney 2014).

Menopause—hot flashes, sleep disruption, bone loss, and cardiovascular risk—goes largely unaddressed. Compounding trauma, depression, and suicidality are complex medical issues that are not adequately researched or addressed in the prison context and through a carceral lens (Thurston et al. 2018; Beck et al. 2013; Hutchison 2019). Long sentences are not

gender-neutral; they magnify harm and diminish opportunities for healing while negatively impacting physical and psychological well-being.



OLDER WOMEN BY THE NUMBERS IN MICHIGAN'S PRISONS

40%

Of women in prison are 45 or older

150

Women who are 45 or older have served 20 years or more

48%

Of women in prison are 40 or older

WOMEN ARE LEFT OUT OF AGE-BASED RELIEF

Michigan's recent constitutional rulings (Taylor, Czarnecki, Parks, Poole, Stovall) recognized that mandatory life without parole for children and young adults under the age of 21 violates the state's cruel or unusual constitutional clause. Yet women are often sentenced at older ages, after years of abuse and coercion, and are excluded by rigid age cutoffs. None of these court cases have reviewed the gendered facts of the unique pathways to crime that girls and women experience prior to their incarceration. Nor have these cases analyzed the serious over-representation of girls, adolescent girls, young emerging adult women, and adult women as survivors of childhood sexual abuse and/or sexual and physical violence more generally (Saar et al. 2015; USCCR 2020; CCJ 2023).

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in a 2020 report: "In comparison to men in prison, women in prison are more likely to report having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse as children and adults. Research and expert testimony suggest that at least 50 percent of women entering prison report experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse prior to their incarceration. Other studies suggest that as many as 90 percent of women in prison experienced traumatic events prior to their incarceration and the most common forms of traumatic experiences report included interpersonal or sexual violence."

These gendered exclusions by the high court leave room for pause; while these sentencing reforms have led to the release of hundreds of men, they have simultaneously left swaths of women with limited avenues toward relief from extreme sentences and release from a prison system rooted in power and control which mimics the life-long violences that many of these women endured prior to their incarceration.

The numbers reveal a fundamental design flaw in age-based resentencing frameworks. As of October 2025, there are 3,496 people serving life without parole in Michigan, including 172 women and 3,324 men.

- ✓ Under an 18–20 eligibility framework, 742 people qualify for resentencing: 719 men and just 23 women.
- ✓ This means only 13.4% of women serving life without parole (23/172) would be eligible for review, compared to 21.6% of men (719/3,324).
- ✓ If eligibility were expanded to age 25, a total of 1,823 people would qualify: 1,759 men and 64 women.
- ✓ Even under this broader framework, only 37.2% of women serving life without parole (64/172) would be eligible, compared to 52.9% of men (1,759/3,324). (AFSC dataset, 10/31/2025).

This is not a quirk of small numbers, it is a structural mismatch between age-bound relief and gendered pathways into criminalization.

Among people serving life without parole in Michigan, women are significantly less likely than men to benefit from age-based resentencing policies. These disparities are statistically significant under both current eligibility ($p \approx .01$) and expanded frameworks ($p < .001$), demonstrating that bright-line age rules systematically exclude women rather than impacting them equally.

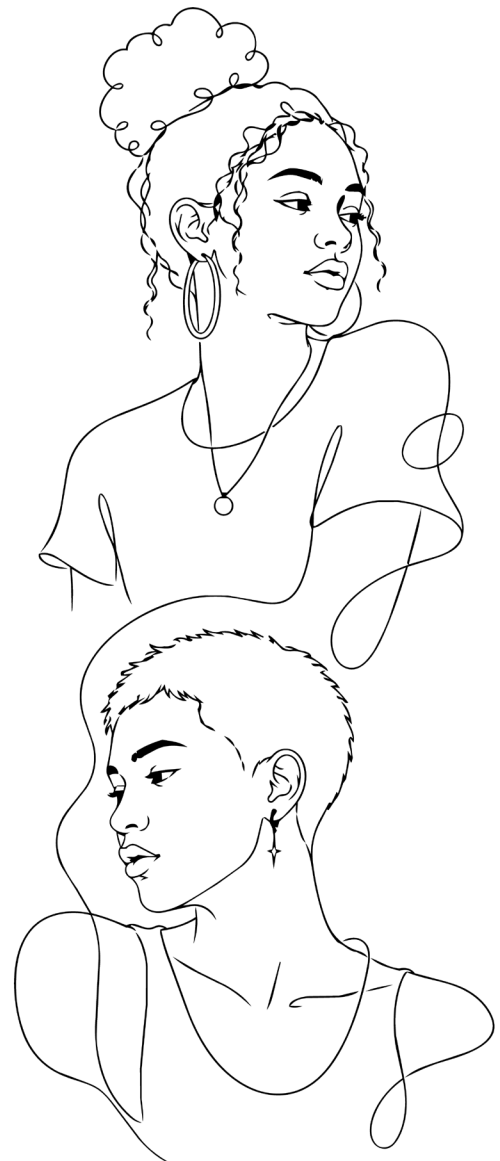
Justice Bernstein: "I write separately to express my reasons for disagreeing with a bright-line rule drawn at age 21: first, I once again highlight the problem of under-inclusiveness that is associated with drawing a bright-line rule; and second, if drawing any line were necessary, I would instead follow the consensus of the relevant scientific studies and draw such a line at age 25."

Justice Bernstein's ruling also illuminates the problematic nature of mandatory life without parole sentences. Mandatory life without parole leaves no room for sentencing mitigation work. This means that people with complex trauma histories have no opportunity to present in court the myriad factors that led them to cause the harm or to be involved in causing harm. The judge must then sentence that person to mandatory life without parole without taking contributing factors, like complex trauma, into account.

The lack of inclusiveness for groups of people in the recent Supreme Court rulings leads to larger systemic issues. Many long-serving men are being resentenced to terms of years and then being considered for parole.

When a vast majority of these people are men, the review systems in place (i.e. parole processes and supervision processes upon release) are attuned to the needs and experiences of the majority, not the minority of a few women who may get resentenced to a term of years or be given the gift of possible liberation through the parolable lifer process or the commutation process.

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It is now widely recognized that survivors of sexual and interpersonal violence may dissociate, experience fragmented or nonlinear memories, and struggle with recall under stress—responses that reflect the neurobiological impact of trauma, not the unreliability of the survivor’s story (End Violence Against Women International 2023).

Yet when survivors appear in the criminal legal system as defendants—often in cases involving self-defense, coercion, or trauma-triggered responses—these trauma effects are routinely reinterpreted as evidence of guilt, inconsistency, or lack of remorse. Dissociation can be perceived as emotional flatness. Fragmented memory can be framed as evasiveness. Evolving narratives can be treated as deception (Herman 1992/2015; End Violence Against Women International 2023).

This disconnect is further compounded by time. Many commutation cases involve convictions that are 20 or more years old—cases adjudicated during a period when the legal system’s understanding of trauma was significantly underdeveloped and shaped by gendered myths about credibility and victimhood.



Women, particularly those who had experienced violence, were far less likely to be believed, and expert testimony on trauma was often limited, misunderstood, or entirely absent (Herman 1992/2015).

Although the science has advanced, the integration of that knowledge into the criminal legal system remains uneven and contested.

Efforts to establish more complex, trauma-informed understandings of violence—particularly violence against women—continue to face resistance within legal frameworks that prioritize linear narratives, fixed memory, and narrow conceptions of credibility (End Violence Against Women International 2023).

This disconnect shapes how parole board members review women—causing a disregard of gendered histories and survivor contexts—in both commutation and parole.

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in a 2020 report: “In comparison to men in prison, women in prison are more likely to report having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse as children and adults. Research and expert testimony suggest that at least 50 percent of women entering prison report experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse prior to their incarceration. Other studies suggest that as many as 90 percent of women in prison experienced traumatic events prior to their incarceration and the most common forms of traumatic experiences report included interpersonal or sexual violence.”

WHAT GUIDES THE DECISIONS TO DENY COMMUTATION?

Does the parole board:

- ✓ examine each woman's current contributions among her peers and with staff and volunteers?
- ✓ meaningfully assess her transformation over decades of incarceration?
- ✓ weigh her individual trauma history?
- ✓ account for the gendered realities of childhood sexual abuse and violence against adolescent girls and emerging adults?
- ✓ evaluate credibility in light of corroborating records, trauma science, and the historical context of a criminal legal system built without these understandings?

Or do longstanding institutional practices limit the board's ability to weigh these cases holistically, with the depth, nuance, and sensitivity to trauma they require?

When applicants are asked to recount events from decades prior with clarity, consistency, and emotional coherence—without recognition of how trauma shapes memory and expression—the risk is clear: trauma is misread as moral deficiency, and survival responses are mistaken for lack of accountability.

In this way, the system reproduces its earlier failures. Cases were adjudicated without the benefit of modern trauma-informed understanding, and release decisions continue to be evaluated under standards that disregard that same body of knowledge.

We must take different approach, one that is consistent with both science and evidence-based practices, that includes specialized, trauma-informed review of women's cases, and that is grounded in the realities outlined throughout this report.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE THROUGH AN OPAQUE PROCESS

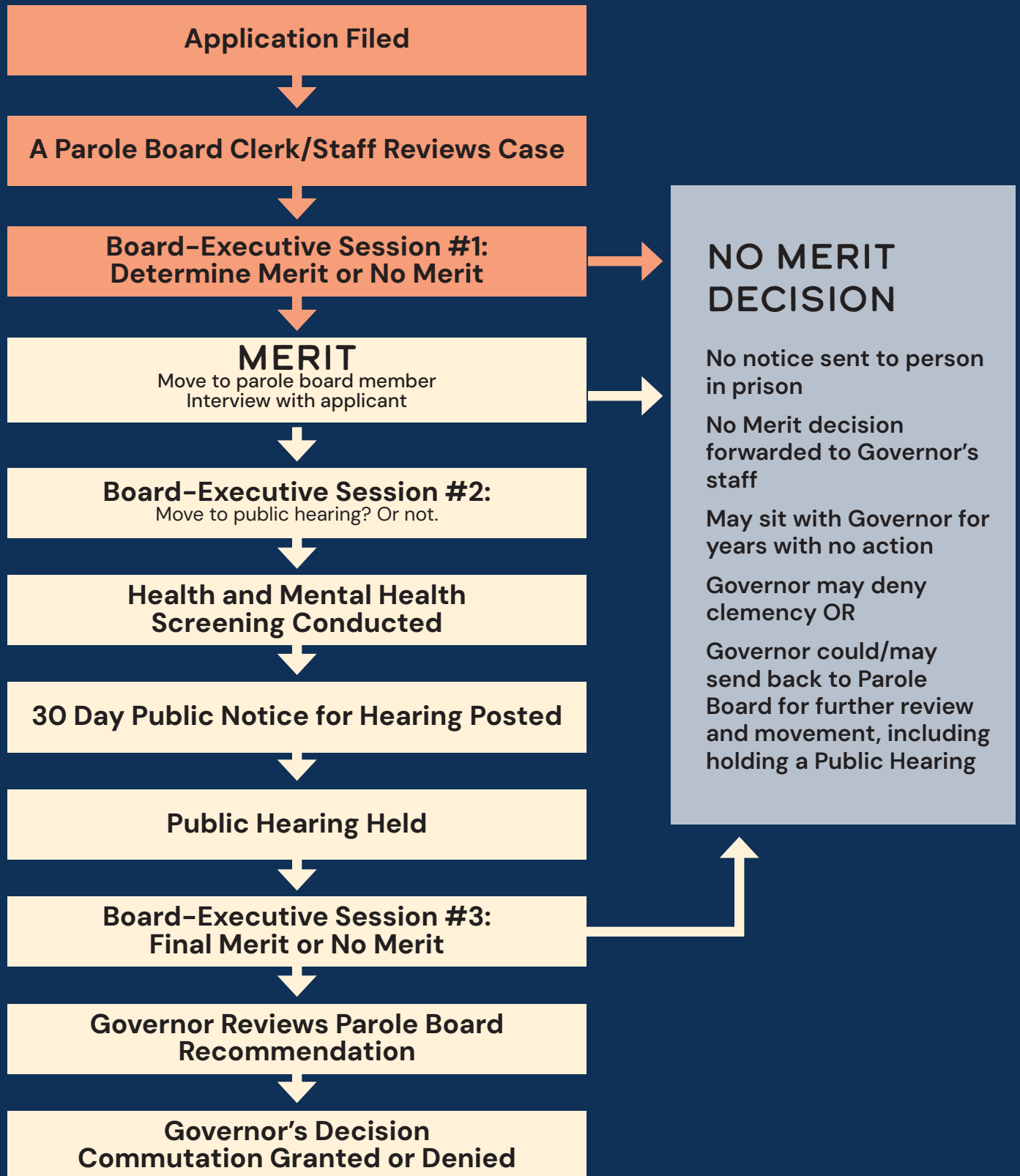
In our work at American Friends Service Committee, we spend hours supporting women as they prepare commutation applications. We train volunteer advocates and staff who walk alongside the women we serve throughout their incarceration, building deep, sustained relationships rooted in trust, care, and accountability. Each commutation application is approached with thoughtfulness, rigor, and collective support.

At the same time, our work is not limited to individual cases. We are committed to cultivating healing and accountability within the broader communities we are all part of—including ourselves. We recognize that interpersonal violence does not

occur in isolation. It is shaped by the conditions we collectively uphold: the disbelieving of survivors, the lack of resources needed to interrupt inter-generational trauma, the normalization of state-inflicted harm, and the reality that many economically marginalized women are left navigating an adversarial legal system with inadequate or ineffective representation.

These systemic failures are not separate from the outcomes we see—they are central to them. It is within this context that the Michigan commutation process must be understood. While there have been some shifts toward a more humane tone in recent years, the process remains fundamentally rooted in the same punitive frameworks that produced the original sentences. The questions asked—particularly by representatives of the attorney general—often require women, many of whom are survivors of profound violence and trauma, to relive and re-narrate the most painful moments of their lives in ways that can be destabilizing and harmful.

CURRENT COMMUTATION REVIEW PROCESS



ELDERLY PEOPLE IN PRISON INCLUDING MEN

It is no secret that extreme sentences have led to an aging and expensive prison population in Michigan. Nearly 1,350 of the people serving life sentences in Michigan have 20 years or more served and are 60 years or older. Of the entire prison population in Michigan, 2,298 people have 20 years or more served and are 60 years or older (AFSC dataset October 2025). In 2023, healthcare services alone in Michigan prisons cost \$278 million (excluding mental health care) (Safe & Just Michigan, 2024).

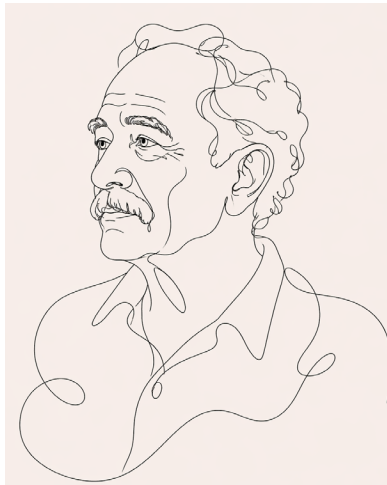
Incarceration shortens life expectancy. The Prison Policy Initiative summarizes research showing that “each year in prison takes two years off an individual’s life expectancy,” and that mass incarceration has measurably reduced overall U.S. life expectancy (Widra 2023). As described earlier, prisons are unhealthy—especially for older adults.

Prison Policy Initiative’s briefing on the National aging prison population documents the rapid growth of the numbers of people 55+ behind bars (from 3% in 1991 to 15% in 2021) and explains why prisons are particularly dangerous for older people who face earlier onset of chronic illness and deteriorating health as they age inside (Widra 2023).

Older folks face the same harsh conditions of confinement with less agility to navigate a hostile environment—whether that is from the rules and regulations of prison or other people living in prison struggling for their own security and well-being.

Michigan’s racial disparities are stark. Sixty-six percent of people serving life sentences in Michigan are Black (Nellis & Barry 2025). More than half of Michigan’s life-sentenced population is already age 55+, and about three-quarters of those older

lifers are serving life without parole (Nellis & Barry 2025). Nationally, over half of all life without parole sentences are imposed on Black people (Nellis & Barry 2025). Compounding these patterns, federal data show that Black men receive significantly longer sentences than similarly situated White men, even after controlling for offense and criminal-history factors (U.S. Sentencing Commission 2023).



Currently, there are 803 Michigan men serving life without parole who are 60 years or older and have served 30 years or more. Approximately 61% of these men are Black and when other tracked demographics are added (not including White men) this number goes up to 65%. This means that 65% of the oldest and longest-serving men in Michigan’s prisons are Black and Brown people (AFSC dataset on file October 2025).

There are 768 men (life sentences with possibility of parole, life without parole and long indeterminate sentences) who have served 40 years or more and are 60 years or older. And there are 84 men serving life without parole who have served 50 years or more and another 29 men with parole for a total of 121 men who have served 50 or more years in the MDOC (AFSC dataset October 2025).

CLEMENCY IS CRITICAL NOW

Michigan's extreme sentencing practices violate both constitutional principles and common sense. These practices perpetuate racial and gender inequities, ignore the mitigating role of trauma, and waste resources that could instead be used to strengthen community safety.

CLEMENCY IS:

- ✓ A constitutional safeguard, consistent with Michigan's ban on "cruel or unusual" punishment.
- ✓ A corrective justice tool, recognizing rehabilitation and the evolution of the standards of decency while remedying disproportionate punishment.
- ✓ A public safety measure, allowing resources to be reinvested into prevention and healing.
- ✓ A moral obligation, aligning state practices with community values of accountability, empathy, and redemption. Transformation is possible and long exposure to cruel or unusual punishment is unconstitutional.

EXECUTIVE ORDER RECOMMENDATIONS

WOMEN'S CLEMENCY AND RESENTENCING INITIATIVE

1

Establish a Presumption of Review and Release for Long-Serving Women

Adopt and publicly announce a survivor-informed clemency review process. This includes establishing a standing presumption in favor of commutation review and release for women who are 45 years or older and have served 20 or more years. This new structure and presumption of review and release require the creation of a community-based, trauma-informed review board including clinicians, advocates, formerly incarcerated women, and reentry specialists.

The current parole board and community review board would then initiate expedited clemency review for the following populations:

Immediate review priority:

- Women aged 45 and older with 20 or more years served who were 18–25 years old (defined as emerging adults, consistent with developmental science) at the time of offense
- Remaining women aged 45 or older with 20 or more years served (life without parole/life sentences with possibility of parole/long indeterminate sentences)
- All reviews must include trauma histories, emerging adulthood factors, aging-related health—including menopause and perimenopause, and evidence of transformation.

2

Expand Review to Younger Women Serving Long Sentences

Review cases of women who have served 10 or more years and move toward a presumption of release framework like outlined in the first recommendation.

3

Implement Transparent, Time-Bound Clemency Review Processes

The current governor can create an executive order that establishes expedited timelines for processing women through a new presumption of clemency process. The only timeline that cannot be shortened is the notification of public hearing to the sentencing judge, prosecutor, and public.

Establish expedited timelines:

- Interview within 30 days
- Public hearing within 45 days after interview
- Decision within 45 days after public hearing
- Ensure trauma-informed processes and shift burden to the state to demonstrate current risk to communities.

4**Reform Decision-Making Standards and Roles**

Prohibit re-litigation of cases and focus decisions on transformation and current public safety risk.

5**Restore Institutional Support for Release**

Reinstate positive conduct reporting, allow positive MDOC staff recommendations (staff write misconducts which are seen and reviewed by the parole board; staff should be able to offer up positives, also) and include program feedback in decision-making.

6**Acknowledge and Address Systemic Harm**

Recognize disparities impacting women and the role of trauma, abuse, and coercion in pathways to incarceration. Recognize that prison conditions and power and control dynamics reproduce these same abuses and harms and then work to create healing and reconciliation.

7**Extend Presumption of Release to Elderly Individuals**

Apply similar review to men who are 60 years old or older with 30 years served or more, prioritizing those with 50 or more years served.

8**Align Release with System Improvements**

Use decarceration to improve prison conditions at Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility and expand access to programs. This includes returning to a single bunked facility, transitioning corrections officers out of the prison, and replacing corrections officers with social workers. Further, it includes working towards creating a different system all together for women. The management of women who are sentenced to prison should be moved to a completely different state department—a department invested in public health, healing, and mental health. The women's prison is a distinct and unique site and should be attended to as such. Policies are written to address violence, harm, and security situations in men's prisons. It is time to 1) free long-serving women and 2) for the people left behind, create opportunities for care and healing through a complete overhaul in prison management and care. A smaller population can move the state towards more restorative practices.

9**Commit to Ongoing Review**

Ensure continued review of extreme sentences and alignment with evolving standards of decency. Continue to build clemency practices rooted in a presumption of release framework.

CONCLUSION

By prioritizing women who have served decades—many of whom are survivors of profound violence and have transformed themselves despite harmful conditions—the governor can take meaningful, systemic action to repair harm, reunite families, and strengthen communities.

This is not a complicated or burdensome undertaking. It is a focused and achievable step: the individualized review and release of women who have already demonstrated deep accountability, sustained growth, and a commitment to change.

Centering these women is both necessary and long overdue. They have been disproportionately impacted by extreme sentencing and consistently left out of existing pathways to relief. A deliberate commitment to a presumption of actually releasing them begins to correct that imbalance while also demonstrating corrective action and accountability from systems that have continuously failed these women.

As outlined in this report, this same approach can be extended to elderly individuals, including men—particularly those who have served decades in prison and no longer pose a public safety risk—while maintaining a clear and necessary focus on women.

This initiative is how we begin to recognize their transformation, restore dignity, and bring these women home.

By prioritizing women who have served decades, many of whom survived violence and transformed themselves despite harmful conditions, the Governor can take systemic action that repairs harm, reunites families, and strengthens communities.



LETTER FROM THE WOMEN OF THE WOMEN'S HURON VALLEY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

March 4, 2026

RE: Solutions for Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility from Women
Serving Long Time at Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility

To whom this may concern:

We, the Women residing at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility, would like to express our most humble gratitude to everyone responsible for ensuring that the concerns which were presented at the recent House Oversight Committee Hearing about our prison were taken into account for paving a path forward toward healing and restoration.

In this same spirit of gratitude, and with the wisdom of lived experience from inside this prison, we have listed out suggestions for solutions that we have titled the **Women's Clemency and Resentencing Initiative**. This plan of actionable solutions will ultimately result in the reform and release of approximately 800 women over a three-year period.

By reducing the population by half, this will reduce strain on the water, electricity, plumbing, sewage and waste systems and allow for necessary remodeling towards a single cell occupancy facility to begin immediately. Reducing the population by half will also allow for accommodating the programming and educational needs of the remaining population to ensure pathways to wellness, healing, reform and release are met with focuses on safety as well as fiscal responsibility.

We know that the implementation of this three Phase initiative is the most viable solution because the areas of concern which need to be addressed to ensure that Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility is habitable and suitable for creating pathways toward wellness, transformation and reunification can and will be corrected once the facility returns to the single cell occupancy that the lay out design was intended for.

Each recommended solutions' phase will create less people in the prison which will open possibilities for prison administrators to move towards making whatever repairs and enhancements that need to happen area by area, if those repairs are warranted. Fewer people creates less physical demand on the infrastructure and less stressors for all.

Phase I would begin today and would expedite the immediate review of the first 100+ women whose sentences we are asking Governor Whitmer to commute before leaving office at the end of this year.

This list of 100+ people consists of women who have exhibited phenomenal transformative participation in and completion of Educational and Program opportunities offered within and beyond Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility (this list was provided to the governor and lawmakers and is not attached to this open letter for the public). These women have not only demonstrated a willingness to learn, grow, heal and transform themselves beyond the circumstances which led them to incarceration, but they have also used the skills and lessons learned to make meaningful contributions to every aspect of living within these conditions of confinement. Whether facilitating groups, leading wellness classes, initiating positive community building activities, providing assistance to staff to make their jobs easier, or simply striving to model the type of behavior that makes for a less stressful living and working environment that others can emulate; each of these women have proven that they will be reliable and valuable contributing members of society upon release.

The list reflects women who fall within a variety of categories indicative of their readiness for release. These categories include:

- The longest serving women who were sentenced to life with or without parole;
- Women who were sentenced to a number of long and indeterminate years who have served over half of their sentence.
- Women who were between the ages of 18–25 at the time of their offense whom have not begun the process towards resentencing at this time and/or did not fall within the age range currently recognized by the Michigan Courts as requiring resentencing under the scientific assertion that the human brain has not reached a developmental stage acceptable for receiving a life sentence for crime committed prior to turning 26.
- This list also includes women who did not have a death in their case and have other mitigating circumstances such as but not limited to having served in the armed forces during war and surviving domestic violence, that would sustain an argument for receiving the merciful act of clemency in their cases.
- Women with release dates in the next two years are not included in this list.

PHASE I

Phase I allows the Governor to pilot fair and transparent processes that are rooted in rectifying not only the conditions at the prison but also relationships and communities. This expedited release initiative would allow the state to begin the process of reducing full time equivalents (FTEs) throughout the Valley and converting inside officer jobs, that will no longer be needed, to community-based jobs dedicated to supporting women as they return to their communities and loved ones.

Phase I would also be a time to develop needs-based assessments that are connected to feedback and modeling from the first 100+ women who are returning home. This initial phase is a time to evaluate and learn while also putting in place the elements needed for phases II and III.

Phase I also includes more robust development of programming, including Moms Empowering Moms, these efforts support women in staying deeply connected to their children (minors, emerging adults, and adults) while still at Women's Huron Valley. Moms Empowering Moms is working to help women stay connected to their children in real and meaningful ways. Women inside agree that they need to be connected to their children every day and all year, not just one day with God. Parenting is a lifetime commitment. Being a mom is a lifetime commitment. It requires support to stay connected. Moms Empowering Moms is already piloted and there is a parenting program at Huron Valley; with less women in the prison, enhanced parenting programs can be implemented and continued.

PHASE II

Phase II would go into effect in January of 2027. The next governor would demonstrate commitment to continuing the work started in Phase I. By 2027, a presumption of commutation would be in full effect, and the parole board (or a new review board) would have an entire contingent of members dedicated to reviewing women's cases with a goal towards release. In addition to Executive Clemency, the legislature should consider, hopefully pass, and enact a Survivor's Justice Act by the end of 2026.

This means that throughout 2027, women who qualify for Survivor's Justice Act would be able to apply to their sentencing judges for resentencing, potentially be resentenced and then released via parole or discharge, accordingly. By the end of 2027 another 350 women would be released through clemency, Survivor's Justice Act, and other forms of resentencing.

In the middle of Phase I, by August of 2026, Healing Homes Farm will be launched, and two to three long serving women will be working in collaboration with multiple stakeholders to further develop programming and services to be offered at Healing Homes Farm. This project is being developed to provide supportive housing with wrap around services and peer led programming for long serving women returning to the community.

Healing Homes Farm is a project founded in understanding the power of transformation, the importance of staying connected to loved ones and community, the love in liberation, and the possibility of always healing. By the end of 2027, Healing Homes will have space for 10-15 returning women (a main house and 6-8 tiny houses). Throughout the creation of this love-centered project, collaborators will document the development of the project to work on replicating in other strategic locations throughout Michigan.

PHASE III

Phase III includes a full revamping of how the women's prison is managed. With less women inside and continued decarceration efforts through 2028 and 2029—leading to another 350 women released for a total of 800 women—the prison can shift to a single cell occupancy prison with the need for way less staff and more access to existing educational and healing programs for the women who remain inside while adding new and innovative transformational program and education opportunities. The impossible work of recruiting officers and in prison health care workers will change to recruiting (or transitioning the no longer needed in-prison staff positions to) social workers, counselors, employment and wellness coaches, and peer leaders to help women continue to reintegrate into their communities and to thrive in healing, restoration, and love.

In conclusion, thank you for the opportunity to be heard and for taking seriously the solutions we are presenting. Repair work is an ongoing process and you can be sure that we are all moving forward together in gratitude.

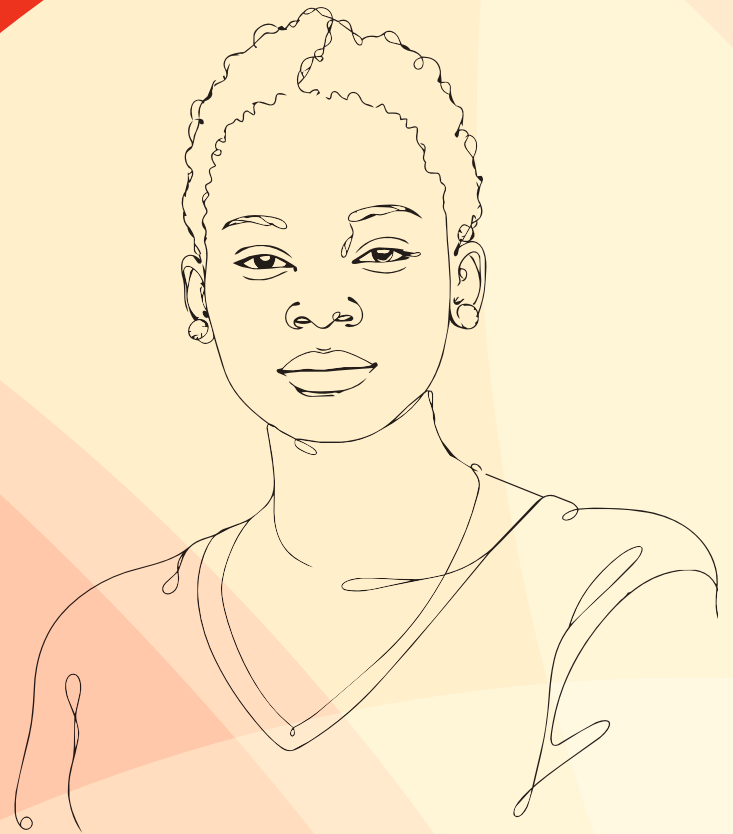
All of this is possible. The time is now.

Respectively submitted,

Women living in the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility

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*“Thank you for the opportunity
to be heard and for taking seriously
the solutions we are presenting.”*

— The Women of the Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility



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