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The City of New York
Community Board 8 Manhattan
Social Justice Committee
Monday, September 28, 2026 - 6:30 PM
This meeting was conducted via Zoom

Minutes:

Committee Members Present: Sarah Chu, Saundrea I. Coleman, and Wendy Machever*

**Public Member*

Approximate Number of Public Attendees: 3

1. Elder Parole: Presentation from Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP)

Presenter: Stanley "Jamel" Bellamy, New York City Regional Community Organizer, Release Aging People from Prison (RAPP)

Speaker background

Mr. Bellamy is the New York City community organizer for RAPP and was formerly incarcerated. He entered prison in 1985 and was sentenced in 1987 to 62 1/2 years to life. He served 37 1/2 years. Governor Hochul granted him clemency, and sent him to the Parole Board, released him in 2023. He began working with RAPP in 2018 while still incarcerated, when RAPP Director Jose Saldana, who had been released, asked him to serve as RAPP's spokesperson inside. The two worked together to develop programs in the prison system intended to help people transform their lives and return home as assets rather than liabilities.

About RAPP

RAPP is a grassroots, statewide organization led by formerly incarcerated people, impacted family members, and others with a stake in the criminal legal system. It has chapters in New York City, Long Island, Westchester, the Hudson Valley, the Capital Region, Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse, and is part of the People's Campaign for Parole Justice, a statewide coalition. RAPP believes in hope, redemption, and transformation, grounded in the lived experience of its members; given enough time, people change, and the system should not punish people forever for the one thing they cannot change.

Legislative Priorities

RAPP is fighting for two parole justice bills.

Elder Parole Bill

- Anyone age 55 or older who has served 15 or more years would be given the opportunity to appear before the Parole Board and make a case for release, assessed case by case. The Board would retain full discretion to deny parole. Mr. Bellamy noted that many people it would help were sentenced in the 1980s and 1990s in their late teens and early twenties. His own elder parole date was 2048, when he would have been 85. Under this bill he would have seen the Board at 55; instead, he came home three months shy of his 61st birthday, and at 64 he must work until about age 75 to 77 to build Social Security credits.

Why 55?

- The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) itself recognizes people as elders at 55 because people age faster in prison (stress, food, and health care). The average age at death in prison has dropped from about 58 to about 54, and someone dies in prison roughly every two days, at younger and younger ages.

Cost

- Incarcerating an older adult costs roughly $140,000 to $220,000 per year. Studies indicate that passage of the two bills together could save the State upwards of $522 million per year.
- Fair and Timely Parole Bill. Complements the Elder Parole Bill and any future sentencing reform. A person before the Parole Board would be judged on who they are now, not who they were 10, 20, or 30 years ago. The Board would retain discretion, but a denial would have to rest on a current risk, supported by some current behavior, rather than on the crime of conviction alone. Mr. Bellamy cited research that people age out of crime in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, that people with college degrees return at lower rates, and that people released after long-term incarceration have a recidivism rate under 1%.

Parole Board practice

- Mr. Bellamy explained that the Board's original purpose was to assess a person's readiness to return to society, but that under Governor Pataki the Board shifted toward denying release to people convicted of violent crimes regardless of transformation. He cited a RAPP founder who received a 15-years-to-life sentence, held two master's degrees and several bachelor's degrees, and was nonetheless denied repeatedly and served 33 years.

Civic duty and community work

- Mr. Bellamy earned his GED and two college degrees in prison and helped develop numerous programs built on a concept of "civic duty": incarcerated people helping transform neighborhoods into vibrant, productive communities, as a way of taking responsibility for harm they caused. Since his release he has spoken at colleges and

organizes in communities across the five boroughs, working with young people to keep them from making the decisions that led to his own incarceration. He noted that concepts such as "credible messenger" and "violence interrupter" were developed by incarcerated people and later adopted by social scientists, and that many people working on the front lines of the communities labeled marginalized are formerly incarcerated men and women who came home committed to giving back.

Biggest fear

- Mr. Bellamy said that while many assume the greatest fear of people in prison is dying there, the deeper fear for those who have changed their lives is being released so late that they can no longer work, contribute, or rely on family support. He urged lawmakers to ask why people should wait that long when they are ready to come home.

Upcoming actions

- A statewide rally is planned for December 1 (the New York City location is not yet determined; Mr. Bellamy will notify the Community Board when it is scheduled). A rally and lobbying trip to the State Capitol is planned for January 26, with free buses; the Manhattan bus will leave from 125th Street at Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard by the State Office Building. Mr. Bellamy invited committee members to attend and speak and offered to send information about rallies, screenings, and other events, and to participate in committee activities.

Q&A

Questions and responses are summarized below. Please refer to the recording of the meeting for the full discussion.

Question: Even though you received clemency, your release still rested with the Parole Board. Is that correct?
Response: Mr. Bellamy said he is grateful to the Governor because he was convicted of homicide and the Governor had not previously released anyone with that conviction. He understood that if he did anything wrong, the people he is fighting for would never get the same opportunity, and that he now speaks for them because RAPP, CUNY School of Law, and others spoke for him.

Question: Can you explain, for our audience, the difference between parole, a pardon, and clemency?
Response: Clemency is the overarching power of the Governor and includes two forms of relief. A pardon erases a conviction and gives the person a clean slate. A commutation reduces a sentence; his own commutation provided that after 37½ years he could go before the Parole Board and, if released, go home. Everyone who receives a pardon receives clemency.
Parole is separate. Under an indeterminate sentence (for example, 10 to 20 years, or 62½ years to life), a person first appears before the Parole Board at the minimum. Three commissioners review the person's file to determine readiness to come home. If denied, a person can be held over for up to two more years at a time; people with life maximums can be held over repeatedly, and some serve 40 to 50 years on a 15- or 25-year minimum. The Board is supposed to evaluate

readiness, not perpetually punish people for the one thing they cannot change. In contrast, determinate ("flat") sentences allow a person to serve 85% of the term without a Parole Board hearing and then released to a period of post-release supervision, which may be five years. People generally prefer parole supervision, from which they can be discharged in as little as three years without incident, whereas post-release supervision runs the full term.

Question: How do the programs you and Mr. Saldana developed inside differ from the programming offered by DOCCS?
Response: DOCCS mandates programs based on a person's conviction, such as a substance abuse program or Aggression Replacement Training (ART) for those with violent convictions. These programs do not address the harm a person caused or give them space for introspection. He described the criminal legal system's treatment of victims: after a report, arrest, charging, and testimony, the system provides no services to help victims heal, and then contacts them decades later to ask how they feel about a possible release, which can retraumatize them. He said healing must occur on two levels, for victims and for the person who caused harm, and that people inside are typically never asked about the victim until they face the Parole Board.
RAPP's peer-developed programs first address the "street codes" that many people adopted, showing how those codes were destructive to the individual, then to their family, the community, and the person they harmed. Mr. Bellamy noted that many incarcerated people were also victims of crime (he was shot at 19), reflecting a duality in many communities. He shared that his first crime he witnessed was at age 9, after a classmate died after reportedly being pushed down subway steps by police. He received no trauma support, became afraid of police, got his first gun at 13, and was incarcerated in his early twenties without any real intervention. Because he and his peers had lived it, they could study and address it, and it was the elders in prison who took him under their wing and led him to commit to helping others.

Question: How many people in the New York prison system are considered elders?
Response: One in four people in New York State prisons is age 50 or older (about 25% of nearly 34,000 people). A little over 1,000 people would be eligible immediately under the Elder Parole Bill (age 55 and older), and that number would grow each year. Many of these individuals, disproportionately people of color, received sentences out of proportion to their crimes during the "get tough on crime" era of the 1980s and 1990s and were then denied parole on the back end, extending their time.

Question: Can you tell us more about your work with schools and young people?
Response: Mr. Bellamy has spoken at junior high schools and, more often, at colleges and law schools, including NYU, Columbia Law School, CUNY School of Law, Cardozo School of Law, and community colleges. He has formed an LLC, Civic Duty Initiative, to bring concepts developed inside into schools and juvenile detention facilities, with the aim of interrupting the path from juvenile facilities to prison. Access to schools was difficult until he recently obtained his Certificate of Good Conduct. He is seeking schools and principals willing to host after-school programs, such as leadership training, personal dynamics, and instruction in writing fiction and novels, and said he has a team ready to participate.

Comment from a participant: A participant suggested partnering with churches, particularly Black churches, describing a successful church event in the Bronx around 2008 or 2009 that

drew over 200 people and featured the CopsCARE program, and asked whether that initiative was still active.
Response: Mr. Bellamy was not familiar with that initiative, but welcomed the suggestion. He noted that RAPP will be conducting adult workshops on criminal justice at churches in Harlem, including a workshop on October 21 at Church of the Heavenly Rest on East 90th Street. He described a 25-week youth curriculum he would like to bring to schools and community groups, covering spiritual enhancement (shared spirituality across denominations), personal development (education, reading, introspection, critical thinking), community empowerment (youth identify what their own communities need), "prison problem solving" (recognizing that no prison problem lacks roots in the community, and that the pipeline between community and prison must be severed), and leadership dynamics. He credited Eddie Ellis's teaching to "pass the torch" to the next generation. Participants offered to follow up offline about introductions to youth and community organizations, including a Harlem youth football league.

Question: What work is RAPP doing at the New York City Council and on local issues?
Response: Mr. Bellamy acknowledged that RAPP's focus has been on state-level work and the prison population, and that this has been a shortcoming he is now working to correct. He said the City Council can effect change in New York City communities, and that Council members can encourage their State legislative counterparts to support the bills, since many of the 150 Assembly members and 63 State Senators come from New York City. He added that the Council controls funding that could be reallocated to communities as prisons close and people are released, and that he intends to build relationships with Council members.

Closing Remarks

Before concluding, Mr. Bellamy reported that both bills have majority support. In the State Senate, 32 senators have co-sponsored each bill, which is the number needed to pass (out of 63). In the Assembly, 76 votes are needed and the bills have 71 co-sponsors, with others saying they would vote yes if the bills reach the floor. The bills need to be put to the floor for a vote. Supporters include three district attorneys, mayors across the State, unions, and crime victims and survivors. RAPP hopes 2027 will be the year the bills are brought to a vote.
The co-chairs thanked Mr. Bellamy for his presentation and for the work RAPP is doing, noted that the committee is hopeful about the upcoming legislative session, and said they would stay in touch. Attendees were encouraged to share the recording of the meeting.

2. Old Business
No items of Old Business were discussed.

3. New Business
No items of New Business were discussed.

A motion to adjourn was made and seconded. This meeting was adjourned at 7:26 pm.

Saundrea I. Coleman and Sarah Chu, Co-Chairs