

Testimony of

LEONARD MARKS

**Retired Brooklyn Bureau Chief
New York State Division of Parole**

Before the

New York State Senate Elections Committee

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Good morning. My name is Leonard Marks. I want to thank the Elections Committee for inviting me to testify today. I would like to speak in support of restoring voting rights to people on parole, and Senate Bill 1266, the Voting Rights Notification and Registration Act.

I retired from a 30-year career with the New York State Division of Parole in 2004. The last 14 years of my career I served as a Chief in the Division's Brooklyn region. While Bureau Chief, I created and ran the Parole Division's only Domestic Violence Program, and ran the Division's Women's Program, Stabilization Program, and Family Orientation Program. Since retiring, I have worked as a consultant to the New York City Department of Probation, as a member of the New York Appellate Division's Law Guardian Program and as a psychotherapist.

I believe that voting and civic participation are critical components of full integration into a democratic society. During my years working for the Division of Parole, I supervised thousands of parolees. One of the greatest challenges facing those who are coming out of prison is the transition from the focus on one's self as an individual that is central to the prison experience, to a focus on one's self as a member of a community that is the reality of life in our democratic society. Having the right to vote and learning how to exercise that right gives one a voice and a stake in the community; it promotes positive behavior and serves as a powerful conduit for making the transition from criminal to becoming a law abiding member of the community.

I believe education about voting rights is consistent and essential to the central mission of parole and community supervision. The core mission of community supervision should be to support the successful transition from prison to the community. Affirming an individual's value to the polity helps rebuild his ties to fellow citizens that motivate law-abiding behavior. Someone who has a stake in the community, who sees himself as a member of that community, is less likely to offend the community.

For these reasons, I support restoring voting rights to people who are out of prison and living in the community, even while they are under supervision. I also support Senate Bill 1266 which would require probation and parole officers to provide information about voting rights, make voter registration forms available to people who are on probation and being discharged from parole, and provide assistance with voter registration. These responsibilities would not create an undue burden on probation and parole offices – indeed, they are central to their mission.

I am not alone in my belief. Several national criminal justice and law enforcement organizations publicly support restoring voting rights to people who are out of prison and living in the community. For example, the American Probation and Parole Association, the Association of Paroling Authorities International and the National Black Police Association have all issued resolutions in favor of restoring voting rights to people on probation and parole. Currently fifteen states and the District of Columbia allow people on probation and parole to vote.

I urge members of the Committee to restore voting rights to people on parole, and to pass Senate Bill 1266.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any question you might have.