

Written Testimony of Larry Smith
Michigan House Committee on Criminal Justice
In Support of Michigan Senate Bill 599
June 18, 2024

Good afternoon, my name is Larry Darnell Smith, Junior. I support SB 599. I live in Southwest Detroit and work at the Kemeny Recreation Center. At my job, I work with senior citizens and youth and everyone in between. I'm a recreation leader and we create programming. For the youth I'm like a big brother, for the seniors I'm like a son.

I am a successful member of my community and opened a barbershop and a market with a returning citizen who is a veteran. I look after my Mom and live about 7 minutes from her. She was recently diagnosed with cancer and I take her to once/week treatments. I have a 31-year-old daughter and lots of family in the area.

I was also incarcerated in Michigan state prisons for 26 years, 10 months, and 7 days for the crime of first-degree homicide and felony firearms. I was exonerated for these crimes, which I did not commit. I was released February 2021. I have been out about 3 years.

In the process of that time period in prison, I thought I would die there – not just for a crime I didn't commit but of old age or sickness. I began to look around. The men that were there, they helped to educate me, uplift me, and show me morality. I started to watch them become elders and pass away. My job in the Michigan Department of Corrections was to be an aide helping people with reading and writing. I'd help sick or disabled people read their mail, write their mail, and things like that.

One person I saw struggle, grow older, and die behind bars was Garwood Turner. I was his aide. I would read his mail to him and write his mail for him. We walked the halls together. His job was to be an engineer inside the facility. But then he ended up getting Parkinson's and dementia and couldn't do the job anymore. He died 47 years into his sentence. He was in his 70s. He should've been released beforehand because of his medical condition. To walk the halls and watch people deteriorate and fall apart...it's hard to see.

Wayne Duff is another older person inside and a family member. He is my Mom's cousin. He was a war veteran and worked at the Marathon Oil Company. He has been in prison for 40 years since the 1980s. He is now 71 years old. In that time, he has become medically frail and cancerous. He does not pose any threat to society.

Wayne could be released safely and come home and live with my Mom and I right now. He has veterans' insurance available because he was honorably discharged. He is an old man, and there is no reason for the state to spend so much money incarcerating him. He has not had any misconduct tickets. We have written to everybody. They are not helping him survive this cancer and he will die there in prison if he doesn't get help.

I am an advocate for the innocent, medically frail, and the over-sentenced. A lot of people have been there for 20, 30, 40 years. The elders in the prison showed me a better way of understanding. They shared their understanding to keep me and others from going down a difficult road, and now I work at a recreation center and contribute a lot. A lot of these older gentlemen are guiding lights for other men.

A lot of them are falling apart physically and mentally. There are many people in state prisons who could come home safely and contribute to our families and communities, as I am. Parole eligibility doesn't mean someone will be released. It is a long process with a lot of checks, home plan, and more.

Please visit a prison and talk to people there. I ask you to vote YES on SB 599 and give medically frail people the chance to go home to their families. Thank you.