

EFREN PAREDES, JR. SPEAKS FROM PRISON AT JUVENILE LIFER FOR JUSTICE RALLY IN DETROIT, JUNE 18, 2017

Good afternoon. My name is Efren Paredes, Jr. and I am co-organizer of the Juvenile Lifer Rally for Justice. I am also a Michigan juvenile lifer from Berrien County who has been incarcerated 28 years since the age of 15. I am now 44-years-old.

I am honored to join you today in solidarity to shine a spotlight on the cruel, extreme, and unforgiving LWOP sentences that were imposed on 363 prisoners who were juveniles at the time of their arrests. Michigan shamefully incarcerates the second largest population of juvenile lifers in the nation. Seventy percent of Michigan juvenile lifers are people of color, a racial disproportionality that compounds this injustice and human tragedy.

As you heard earlier in the program, prosecutors from Berrien, Genesee, Macomb, Oakland, and Saginaw counties are shamefully seeking LWOP sentences for almost all the 100 juvenile lifer cases in those counties being resentenced. Wayne County is seeking LWOP sentences for 61 of the 158 cases in its jurisdiction. They are doing this despite the U.S. Supreme Court making it abundantly clear in a ruling five years ago that LWOP sentences should become "rare," "uncommon," and only reserved for individuals who are "incapable of change" for the remainder of their lives.

In recent years 19 states have banned LWOP sentences for juvenile offenders and six states have no juveniles serving the deplorable sentence. This means that half the country has abandoned the practice while many Michigan prosecutors have maliciously obstructed justice in juvenile lifer cases for the past five years. During this time six juvenile lifers have died awaiting the justice they were never fortunate enough to receive.

Prisoners serving life sentences who are paroled statistically have less than a 2% chance of reoffending. They have ranked the lowest of all offense categories for over 100 years and consistently demonstrated they can be safely returned to society with minimal risks or danger to the public.

We stand here at a critical moment in history. Children for generations will be impacted by our decision to act or our unwillingness to do so. We cannot sit silently in the periphery as spectators and allow the lives and futures of our young people to be carelessly thrown away.

We betray humanity when we condemn people to die in prison because of mistakes they made when they were children. Sentences that seek to extinguish the human spirit and

abandon the concept of redemption are diametrically opposed to the will of God.

It is also cruel, inhumane, and un-American to keep prisoners incarcerated beyond the time necessary to rehabilitate them. It is a fact that Michigan incarcerates prisoners longer than any other state in the country. There is no place in a civilized society for sentences that perpetuate human storage in a harsh world in which prisoners are treated as bodies kept alive only to later be disposed of.

Our foreparents fought and sacrificed to end the brutal sin of slavery. They fought for women's rights, the right of people of color to vote, to end segregation and inequality, and scores of other injustices. It is in this same spirit that we come together today to end LWOP sentences for youth and reform our criminal justice system for all prisoners.

Today we are calling on:

Prosecutors to:

- Uphold the Model Rules of Professional Responsibility statement as ministers of justice;
- For them to have more than a nominal commitment to rehabilitation;
- To stop pursuing LWOP sentences that are at odds with U.S. Supreme Court rulings; and
- To stop delaying juvenile lifer resentencing hearings across the state.

We are calling on judges to:

- Impose the minimum term-of-year sentence allowed pursuant to MCL 769.25 for all juvenile lifers being resentenced and stop imposing LWOP sentences on juvenile offenders.

We are calling on lawmakers to:

- Pass legislation abolishing LWOP sentences for juvenile offenders; to
- Give jurisdiction to the Parole Board to begin reviewing all juvenile lifer cases for meaningful parole consideration annually after serving 15 years; and to
- Allow juvenile offenders who are resentenced to receive good time and disciplinary credits, which is currently not allowed.

Prosecutors must stop exploiting this issue for political gain and end their deliberate efforts to subvert justice. Abuse of authority, wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars, and refusal to adhere to the rule of law and principle of fairness all constitute prosecutorial misconduct.

We can assure you that citizens will not forget about this at the ballot box during the

next election cycle. We are committed to organizing a massive voter block of citizens to replace officials engaging in misconduct or exhibiting failed leadership.

An email group is currently being developed for supporters to join and remain a part of our campaign for prison reform. We highly encourage you to register at our information table and provide your email address so we can keep you updated about future organizing and reform efforts. We also have plans to form a political action committee to address criminal justice reform which we will be unveiling in the coming weeks.

Today only marks the beginning of a protracted campaign to galvanize voters to reform our criminal justice system and three branches of state government at every level. The list will include the the Governor, lawmakers, mayors, judges, prosecutors, city clerks, and other offices.

With 100,000 citizens entangled in the state's criminal justice system, their friends and family members number well over a million voters. Countless lives have suffered and been devastated by the chilling effect of the state's draconian mass incarceration policies and rage to incarcerate.

Elected officials will discover the enormous impact that this number represents in the coming months as we mobilize citizens, their family members, friends, and neighbors to cast their votes during the next election cycle. They will become the living, breathing embodiment of the truth that power lies in the people.

On behalf of Michigan's juvenile lifers, thank you all for coming out today and supporting our efforts to help everyone impacted by mass incarceration in some way. Thank you for keeping the torch of hope burning and being our lifeline.

I know firsthand the value and meaning of having the love and support of family. My parents and family have faithfully stood by my side for nearly three decades of incarceration and fiercely fought for me to return home. Their support is a precious gift that can mean the difference between living a life filled with hope or drowning in an ocean of despair.

Happy Father's Day to all our wonderful fathers and future fathers, and a special Father's Day and birthday to my father who is present today.

Thank you all for listening and being a part of this incredible event.