

Our Readers Speak: Parole board responds to recent letter

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Carolyn Reed, mother of a Montana State Prison inmate, recently wrote a letter to the editor alleging her son has been treated unfairly by the state Board of Pardons and Parole.

First, let me clarify the board's role. Parole is a privilege earned and not a right of prisoners. The board's primary responsibility in making decisions is public safety. The law says the board may release any person when the board believes the person is able and willing to fulfill the obligations of a law-abiding citizen and when the board believes the prisoner can be released without detriment to the prisoner or the community.

In this case, Reed's son was granted parole on Oct. 31, 2006, upon completion of a second treatment cycle at the six-month WATCh program, which is specifically designed to treat felony DUI offenders and has a tremendous success rate. If he chooses to cooperate, he can be released prior to the expiration of his sentence, which is July 6, 2008. If not, he will be released when his term expires.

He was required to complete WATCh a second time because of his record. He is serving a five-year sentence for felony DUI. This is his second conviction for a fourth or subsequent drunken-driving offense. He also has a prior felony conviction for possession of a weapon, and 14 traffic and misdemeanor convictions.

The board carefully considered the circumstances leading to his current incarceration. Since 1998, Reed's son has been given three opportunities to correct his behavior and become a law-abiding citizen who does not pose a danger to others. He failed each time. The determination that he needed a second term in the WATCh program was based on his multiple felony drunken-driving convictions. The board did not "enhance" his sentence or rescind the offer of parole, as Reed states. The board's decision was based on the history of her son's behavior.

The board is not "robbing" taxpayers or causing a crowded prison system. The board is doing its part, following appropriate laws, releasing deserving offenders to community placements and keeping undeserving or dangerous prisoners incarcerated.

During the past five years, the Board has released 2,854 offenders to parole supervision, including a record 635 in 2006. In that same time, 694 paroled offenders have successfully completed their sentences in the community.

The board has approved parole for nearly six out of 10 offenders appearing before it.

I believe the board's record speaks for itself, as does Reed's son's.

Craig Thomas
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