

February 28, 2022

Dear Mr. Grote,

My name is Martina Westcott and I am currently serving a 22-44 year sentence at SCI Muncy. I was sentenced to the maximum in spite of having a gravity score of zero and a positive history of civil service as a public health professional with the Department of Public Health in Philadelphia. A University of Pennsylvania graduate, I have a Master of Public Health degree from Thomas Jefferson University.

I am writing in regard to your request for submissions to be included in the letter to United Nations experts. While I do not have a technical "life" sentence, my sentence constitutes "life" in most states. My sentence eliminates the possibility of me bearing children, pursuing a PhD in my field of study, and improving public health outcomes around the world.

The possibility of commutation is a driving force for me. Having completed all of the rehabilitative programming offered at this facility during my 5 years of incarceration, I am currently at a frustrating standstill. I

absolutely believe that laws that allow death by incarceration (DBI) sentences should be changed to allow for the possibility of parole, especially in Commonwealth states like Pennsylvania. Everyone convicted of a crime deserves the opportunity to earn a second chance. There are lifers here who have not had a single misconduct in 20+ years. There are lifers and long-tenners here who have had family members driving in for 4+ hours to visit them regularly. Many lifers have strong support systems, many people who would be willing to house, employ, and emotionally support them upon release. I do believe that "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." We need the vision of long-tenners and lifers in this world - we need their compassion, their unique perspective having experienced the atrocities of the U.S. penal system, their patience, their perseverance. We need their skills and talent free, not boxed in and stifled in a place like this. We need their genius. Their innovation. Their will to survive. We need their stories. Their legacies. We need to pool all of our resources in these turbulent times; we cannot⁸⁶ afford to shut out

our brothers and sisters with DBI [or an excessive] sentences.

In the words of one lifer [who has since passed away while incarcerated], "Having a life sentence is like pouring water on a fire that will never go out." Lifers know that no matter how much work they do to better themselves, no matter how many certificates they accumulate, no matter how many classes they lead or degrees they acquire, the reality of their sentence guarantees their death in a 9x11 cell. That is a heavy mental toll I don't know how my sisters with life sentences bear. But I've witnessed them not just bear the weight, but bear it with a smile. They pour advice, knowledge, encouragement into women with minimums far closer to suicide than they are. They speak life into their situations. They decline medication for the depression and anxiety the Psychology department insists they should have. They share what little they have with those who have even less. I have witnessed, and gratefully received, their generosity. I have lived with lifers - Anis Lee, Hennieta Hamis, Rose Marie Dinkins. Ms. Lee and Ms. Hamis have now gone

home on commutation and my current roommate, Ms. Dinkins, is waiting for her decision from the parole board. I proudly speak their names because they are the source of my hope, the faces of my faith. They are the reasons I continue running this race.

I would like to see more restorative justice practices in U.S. prisons. I would like to see open lines of communication between [willing] victims and the incarcerated, rather than correspondence being discouraged [or forbidden]. DBI sentences are inhumane and run counterintuitive to the idea that prison rehabilitates. Rehabilitation requires the chance to demonstrate that growth, to act it out in the free world and prove that your felony doesn't define you.

I would also like to see laws changed with regard to conspiracy - DBI sentences given to women [and men] who did not physically kill or harm anyone are almost always unnecessarily excessive. I believe they should be the first cohort considered for parole.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to participate in this project.

Martina⁸⁸ Westcott, MPH