

To Special Rapporteur Tendayi Achiume, Special Rapporteur Alice Jill Edwards, Independent Expert Claudia Mahler, Special Rapporteur Morris Tidball-Binz, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention:

My name is Caroline Hansen and I write in support of the five (5) recommendations in our forward in joint testimony by the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign/RAPP, Abolitionist Law Center, and other leading advocates for the human rights of incarcerated people. In addition to serving as a Long Island Community Leader for RAPP, I am the wife of a man serving a Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentence in New York State prison.

Life without parole sentences and other “Death by Incarceration” sentences are living death sentences. They accomplish nothing except to break people’s spirits. My husband, like many others serving such sentences, has done all he can to make his life behind bars meaningful, participating in every available program and mentoring young people to build a brighter future, even if he is to be denied any and all opportunity to experience it himself as a free man. I regularly hear from younger men in prison that my husband helped them change their lives, and the officers commend him for being a role model for the other inmates.

Our two daughters and I want him to have a chance to come home – that’s all we ask. A chance. His spirit is unbroken, and his goodness is intact.

As a 20-year-old, he was a high school dropout with serious addiction, and he committed a horrible crime. To this day, he is haunted by his action, and the devastation he caused the family of the victim and his own family. We cannot change the past, but we can change ourselves.

My mother-in-law remains optimistic that he will one day come home but she expects that day will only come after she has passed away, and that crushes her. I myself know it is possible that he will never come home – that he will die in prison, as the state of New York has planned for him. That is a reality that leaves me with a knot in my stomach. Every time we have a visit, the knot is untied, but it returns with fury when I have to leave him. The visits themselves present serious hardships; I have to wake up before the sun, drive halfway across the state, wait in line for hours amid extreme and sometimes dangerous weather conditions, from near zero degrees and blistering winds to one-hundred degrees and high humidity, only to face abusive officers. While we wait, there are no bathrooms or other accommodations, because the system views us – people in prison and their families alike – as less than human. So, to maintain our relationship, and to relieve the intestinal dread I feel when we are apart, I visit my husband regularly, but doing so comes at a steep price for myself and my family. I cannot imagine having to keep visiting him in prison when I am 90 years old.

We have been denied clemency several times. The reasoning for this denial is he has no “minimum” sentence. It was the state that issued his sentence and now the state cruelly says it cannot undo its own action. As a community organizer, I work with many men and women who have overcome long prison sentences and returned home to do great work serving the communities they hurt long ago. My husband, and others like him, deserve a chance to join them.

Again, I echo RAPP and the other esteemed organizations in respectfully urging the Special Rapporteurs to declare that:

1. All DBI sentences in the United States, including LWOP sentences, are cruel, racially discriminatory, an arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and violate individuals' right to life, family life, dignity, and liberty disproportionality on the basis of race;
2. The United States should abolish all DBI sentences, including LWOP sentences;
3. The United States should adopt maximum sentencing laws to end the imposition of "virtual life" and other lengthy or indeterminate sentences;
4. All prison sentences must include parole eligibility within a determinate number of years;
5. All those eligible for parole should be released at their eligibility date, unless there is an evidence-based determination, through a process that meets international human rights

Thank you for considering my comments.