



## VOLS Guide for Parole Advocacy: Parole Packet Creation and Interview Prep

### *For Attorney and Volunteer Use Only*

Parole hearings are crucial opportunities for incarcerated people to gain early release and reunite with their families and communities. VOLS Incarcerated Mothers Law Project (IMLP), as an offshoot of the project's current work in women's correctional facilities in New York, assists incarcerated individuals to prepare for their parole hearings. IMLP is committed to strengthening communities, especially targeted and vulnerable communities, by reuniting families.

This guide is intended only for use by IMLP staff and volunteers, and it serves only as a guideline. Each client's experience, and consequently our parole advocacy, will be different.

### What is Parole?

Parole is the conditional release of an incarcerated person before the end of their sentence, based on good behavior and perceived rehabilitation. In New York, the [State Board of Parole](#) decides whether an individual has met the criteria to be granted parole, evaluating factors such as the nature/seriousness of the offense, criminal history, behavior in prison, release plans, statements by victims, and potential risk to public safety. A granting of parole is necessarily preceded by a Parole Hearing in which an incarcerated individual answers questions from the Board and advocates for their own release. An incarcerated individual may also submit a Parole Packet in advance of the hearing to further strengthen their argument for early release.

### What are the outputs?

As a pro bono attorney or volunteer assisting with a client's application for parole, your two branches of work are: (1) Parole packet creation and (2) Parole Board interview preparation.

This guide provides an overview of both aspects of the process. The parole packet creation process begins first and is typically the more work-intensive part of parole advocacy. Note that attorneys are **not permitted** to attend the parole hearing to advocate for their client directly with the Board.

### Overview of Timeline

- **5-6 months before the interview:** Case assignment and initial tasks. IMLP will discuss any background they already have on the parole client.
  - Expect to set up at least 3-4 legal calls over the next few months. Unanticipated issues are likely to come up while putting the packet together, so more legal calls and/or consults with the IMLP team may be needed.
  - As early as possible, begin the process of obtaining and consolidating parts of the packet that might take more time (e.g., letters of support; key DOCCS documents).
  - Encourage your client to start thinking about housing and employment plans when they are released, if they haven't already.

- **3-4 months before the interview:** Continue compiling documents for the parole packet + writing the personal statement.
  - Advise your client to begin drafting their personal statement (Letter to the Board). It is beneficial to have time to do multiple drafts before finalizing the letter.
- **2 months before the interview:** Set up 1-2 legal calls to begin prepping for the interview and wrap up any issues with the personal statement and/or compiling supporting documents. Begin crafting the advocacy letter.
- **4-6 weeks before the interview:** Finish first draft of the advocacy letter. Create advocacy packet cover page and exhibit index.
  - The IMLP team will review your advocacy letter and parole packet draft at this time.
- **1-2 weeks before the interview:** Do 1-2 mock interviews with your client; Ensure the client has an updated copy of the entire parole packet.
- **7-10 days before the interview:** Mail the packet to the SORC at the relevant facility as well as the client themselves.
- **5-7 days before the interview:** Confirm that the SORC received the packet (via phone call) and is prepared to deliver it to the Board. Confirm that the applicant received their copy.

### Key Factors in the Parole Decision

- **Offense and Criminal History:** Severity of the crime and prior criminal history.
- **Behavior in Prison:** Evidence of rehabilitation, including work, education, accomplishments, and participation in services inside the facility (called “programming”).
- **Risk to Public Safety:** Assessment of whether the individual poses a threat to society.
  - **COMPAS score and risk of “recidivism”:** Though a flawed instrument, the board strongly considers the COMPAS risk evaluation administered by your client’s ORC. “Low” COMPAS scores signify a lower likelihood of recidivism. “High” scores indicate a higher “risk” to public safety. Highlight “low” scores and give reasoning for “high” scores.
- **Personal Development:** Growth, maturity, and [accountability and remorse](#) for past actions. The client’s awareness and acknowledgement of the issues that led to their incarceration (e.g. traumatic family dynamics; an abusive/controlling romantic relationship; substance abuse issues, etc.) and how they have or will address those issues in the future.
- **Future Plans and Goals:** Plans for housing and employment upon reentry. Plans and goals for reunifying with family and community. Family and community support.

### Hard Topics: Accountability and Remorse

Each parole client is likely to have a different relationship to remorse and accountability regarding their conviction. Some clients may not feel conflicted at all about expressing remorse for their actions. Some clients may have acted at the behest of an abusive partner and felt they had no other choice. Some clients may struggle with substance abuse and not fully remember their actions. Some client’s trauma responses may not let them take accountability because it doesn’t feel safe. Many clients were initially counseled by their criminal attorney not to apologize or show remorse, and now they are being asked to do something drastically different.

As an advocate, it is your job to understand and respect your client's story while still presenting a compelling narrative to the Board. The Board wants to see what they feel is appropriate remorse and accountability. They will likely look down upon any perceived show of defensiveness or excuse-making. For example, a client may genuinely not feel remorse for actions they feel they took in self-defense. Could they instead express that they have learned how to identify and avoid toxic relationship dynamics? Could they recognize someone else's wrongdoing while admitting they should have reacted differently? Or have removed themselves from the situation? Can they focus on the future and assure the Board that nothing like this will happen again? How can your client show remorse and accountability in a way that is most comfortable for them and closest to their truth?

## Telling the Client's Story

It is possible but unlikely that your client's story will be the straightforward narrative that the Board wants to hear ("I did something bad, I regret it, I'm completely rehabilitated by prison, and I'll never do it again"). It is important for you, and your client, to reflect on how to present their complex truth. For instance, past trauma in a client's life can be beneficial in explaining to the Board how your client ended up where they are. However, you want to be careful that you are not presenting the client's background in a way that the Board will see as making excuses.

As an example, consider: "I made a bad decision" vs. "I made a mistake." Though the difference may seem trivial, the Board may interpret "making a mistake" as dodging accountability. Pay close attention to the perception that your client is excusing their actions versus explaining their actions.

## An Important Contact: Your Client's ORC

Your client's Offender Rehabilitation Coordinator (ORC) is an important contact throughout the parole preparation process. ORCs are responsible for, among other things, pre-Parole Board interviews with your client, creation of reports that go to the Board, and assistance with the client's release plan. Your client should be aware that the ORC is providing information to the Board pre-interview, though they will likely not have much say about what the ORC chooses to submit to the Board. Check in with your client about their relationship with their ORC and how/if their ORC is helping them prepare for potential release. A communicative ORC can be helpful, but an obstructive or unreachable ORC can be a hindrance.

If questions or issues come up related to DOCCS, the ORC is a good first contact. **You can reach the ORC by calling the facility, asking for Guidance, and then asking for a specific ORC by name.** Let the ORC know that you are assisting your client in preparing their parole packet. You can present yourself as a resource for them as they are (supposed to be) preparing your client for reentry. You and your client should try your best to maintain a positive relationship with their ORC as they are asked to include subjective judgements and impressions in their reports to the Board. Aim for a cordial, collaborative relationship with the ORC where possible, while still holding them accountable their duty to the client.

# I. Communicating with your Client

## Reaching Out to Your Client

When beginning parole advocacy, making an initial connection with your client is a critical step in building trust and setting the tone for a productive attorney-client relationship. Introduce yourself and explain your

role in their case. Clarify that you are reaching out to support their parole process and advocate on their behalf. Many clients may feel uncertain or anxious about the process, so it's important to communicate in a way that reassures them of your commitment and explains what they can expect moving forward. One important aspect of this is transparency, which includes your role as an advocate and your general timeline and responsibilities.

During your initial communication, gather essential background information and invite the client to share their perspective on their rehabilitation, goals, and readiness for parole. Emphasize confidentiality and your role as their advocate. Make space for their questions and concerns and be prepared to explain the parole process in plain, accessible terms. Establishing open, non-judgmental communication early on lays the foundation for effective representation and helps clients feel seen, heard, and supported throughout their parole journey. Explain your role and the two parts of the process you will assist with: (1) parole packet preparation and then (2) parole interview preparation. Establish what documents they already have, if any, and pinpoint which documents they still need (see the section “**Time-Sensitive: Key Documents**” below).

## Interviewing Your Client

### General Considerations

When interviewing parole advocacy clients, attorneys should prioritize creating a safe and respectful environment. Throughout, use open-ended questions and give the client time to respond without interruption. Listen actively to what is said and pay attention to body language and tone to better understand your client. Defer to your client’s expertise in their own experience. While you can provide legal assistance, it is your client’s hearing and their story to tell.

During all interviews, take detailed notes. Avoid making assumptions; instead, focus on capturing facts, timelines, and the client’s personal reflections in their own words. Document specific examples that illustrate rehabilitation efforts, institutional programming, insight into past behavior, or future plans—these will be especially valuable in written advocacy. Always maintain confidentiality and ensure notes are securely stored. Clearly lay out the next steps for both you and the client during each meeting.

### Trauma-Informed Advocacy

Many, if not most, incarcerated individuals have experienced complex trauma—before and after incarceration—which can deeply affect how they recall and share their experiences. Trauma-informed practices are grounded in an understanding of how trauma affects individuals’ thoughts, emotions, behavior, and communication. For attorneys advocating for parole, this means approaching each interaction with awareness, sensitivity, and adaptability. A trauma-informed interview acknowledges that clients may have developed survival strategies—such as dissociation, guardedness, or anger—that were adaptive in past environments but may be misinterpreted in a legal setting. It’s also essential to avoid abrupt questioning, aggressive confrontation, or shaming language, as these can mirror past experiences of abuse or institutional harm.

Attorneys should focus on building trust and approach their clients with empathy and patience, recognizing that trauma may affect memory, emotional regulation, and communication. Rather than focusing solely on the facts of a client’s past or their offense, attorneys should consider the broader context of the client’s life

story—adverse childhood experiences, systemic injustices, and survival mechanisms. This approach not only helps uncover mitigating factors relevant for parole advocacy but also supports the client’s dignity and agency. A trauma-informed lens ensures that the legal process does not unintentionally re-traumatize and instead becomes an opportunity for healing and self-advocacy.

## Scheduling Legal Calls

Please find instructions for scheduling legal calls, as well as templates for email requests, in the [VOLS Pro Bono Library Incarcerated Mothers Law Project tab](#) under “Setting Up Legal Calls in Prisons and Jails in NYS.”

## II. Parole Packet

The Parole Packet is the combination of: the Advocacy Letter, written by you; a Personal Statement from the client; Letters of Support; and other Supporting Documents. The packet aims to tell your client’s story and present to the Board a complex and accurate picture of the human being in front of them. It plays an important role in convincing the State Board of Parole that your client should be released.

### Best Practices for a Successful Parole Packet

- **Get to know your client well:** The parole packet will frame the client’s story in a way that highlights the person’s individuality and tells a story of rehabilitation (though we know, of course, that the prison industrial complex is not rehabilitative). Ensure that legal calls are scheduled often and regularly so you can get to know your client, learn what they feel comfortable with you sharing, and how they feel about this re-framing of their story.
  - Personal details about the client are helpful. Consider including information about a client’s community, possibly pictures, etc.
- **Supporting documents are key:** Get started early in collecting supporting documents because of how long records collection may take. A letter from a supporting correctional officer can be hugely helpful but can take weeks to procure; a “clean” disciplinary record from DOCCS is persuasive but could take months.
- **Tone and Style**
  - **Avoid sounding defensive or making excuses:** The board will likely be more receptive to a tone of remorse, learning, and growth, rather than re-litigating aspects of the offense.
  - **Be prepared for things that may raise concern:** Acknowledge the gravity of the offense while emphasizing the client’s rehabilitation.
  - **Remember the audience:** Parole Board Commissioners can be former prosecutors, police and parole officers, and/or investigators.

### Parole Packet Components in General

- I. Cover Page
- II. Index of Documents
- III. Advocacy Letter
- IV. Client Personal Statement (also known as a Letter to the Board)
- V. Letters of Support
- VI. Other Supporting Documents

- a. Internal DOCCS Records that Support their Parole
    - i. Vocational Records
    - ii. Educational Records
    - iii. Disciplinary Record (if helpful)
  - b. Records from non-DOCCS Programming (e.g., Hour Children; Step-by-Step; Puppy Program)
    - i. Certificates of Completion of Workshops (Parenting, Therapy, etc.)
    - ii. Confirmation of Current Participation in any Programming
  - c. Records related to reentry (housing, employment, etc.)
    - i. Documents/letters confirming housing or employment
    - ii. Letters of reasonable assurance (if applicable)
  - d. Apology Letter (if applicable)
- VII. **Is there anything else your client can submit to show their progress?**

### Time-Sensitive: Key Documents and Letters of Support

Supporting documents and letters of support are the foundation of a strong parole advocacy packet, as they provide independent evidence of the client’s rehabilitation, community support, and reentry plans. These materials help corroborate the client’s narrative and give the Parole Board confidence in the individual’s readiness for release. However, it’s important for attorneys to understand that gathering these materials can take time. Family members, employers, mentors, and program staff may need help understanding what to include in a letter or may have limited ability to draft one quickly. Similarly, obtaining records such as certificates, program completion letters, or treatment summaries often involves navigating bureaucratic delays. Attorneys should begin identifying and requesting these documents as early as possible in the representation process to ensure the final submission is complete and persuasive.

### Internal DOCCS Documents

The Board is required to review certain documents before making a parole decision regarding your client. If possible and time permitting, it can be helpful to obtain and review these documents. Knowing what the Parole Board will review can help your client anticipate the Board’s questions and respond to concerns. You may want to include some of these documents in the parole packet, like a clean disciplinary record, if relevant.

Many of these internal DOCCS documents can be requested from your client’s ORC, though that can be time-consuming and the ORC may not know how to request/obtain them. You can also file a FOIL directly addressed to the facility, but historically IMLP has had significant issues in getting a timely answer (or an answer at all).

Note that you will likely not be able to change or influence these records, even if they contain inaccuracies. You should not focus on correcting the record, but on preparing your client for how to address these issues if they come up in the hearing.

- **Pre-Sentence Report (PSR):** Sometimes called Pre-Sentencing Investigation (PSI). The PSR/PSI is a report compiled by the Department of Probation before a person is sentenced that contains general background information about your client and the prosecution’s version of your client’s underlying crime. Per [DOCCS Directive #8370](#), your client should be able to request this report from their ORC. Your client can also request their PSR/PSI from the sentencing court via mail ([Parole Prep Project has a helpful sample letter here](#)).

- **Sentencing Minutes:** The Parole Board is required to try to obtain the transcript from your client's Criminal Court sentencing as well as any current statements from the prosecutor, judge and/or the defense attorney. These can be extremely prejudicial, though often difficult to actually procure (even for the Board). Your client's former defense attorney may have access to these minutes. You can also call the sentencing court and ask about their process for obtaining sentencing minutes. You will need to provide the date of your client's conviction, the date of sentencing, your client's NYSID, and likely the name of the Judge who sentenced your client.
- **Parole Board Report:** This is a report that your client's ORC prepares pre-interview. Your client should be able to request this from the ORC, but it may not be timely.
- **Past Transcripts of Parole Interviews:** If your client has been in front of the Board before, it is important to review what questions the Board asked and how the client answered at the time. The transcript is sometimes included when the Board sends the initial denial. A transcript can also be requested directly from the Board: New York State Board of Parole, 1220 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York 12226.
- **COMPASS Report:** This document is also compiled by the ORC (more details in [DOCCS Directive #8500](#)). There are often errors in COMPASS reports. Your client should first speak to their ORC about perceived errors in the report. If that fails, they can reach out to their SORC or even file a grievance. Consider how to approach addressing inaccuracies in the COMPASS during the interview.
- **Educational, Programming, and/or Disciplinary Records:** Reports that DOCCS has about your client's time while incarcerated. Can be a request to the ORC or FOILED. Especially important if your client's underlying crime was related to substance abuse issues and they received drug or alcohol treatment while incarcerated.
- **Health Records:** These may only be relevant if you have received mental health counseling through OMH to show progress there (or address any issues). Requires a HIPAA-compliant release form.

### Other Documents

- **Other non-DOCCS programming certificates or awards:** Programming inside the facility can include parenting classes, art classes, yoga classes, spiritual programs, and more from external non-profit organizations (e.g. Hour Children, Step-by-Step, Bard College, Puppy Program). There are often certificates of completion or awards from these programs. Also consider whether anyone associated with these programs would write a Letter of Support. Be sure to emphasize which achievements took the most time and effort to achieve.
- **Photographs of family and friends:** Pictures are great additions to an advocacy letter. Ask your client if friends or family have photos they could send.
- **Artwork or poetry:** Artwork, poetry, or other art can be included, even if it doesn't directly relate to reflection of their time in prison. Humanize your client and show the Board that they've been busy.
- **Other documentation or materials that can show your client's growth and progress while incarcerated. Be creative!**

### Letters of Support

Letters of Support offer an opportunity to humanize your client to the Board and offer a counter-narrative to the client's DOCCS records. Letters of support can be written by family, friends, children, other incarcerated folks, social workers, programming staff, correctional officers (in certain circumstances), employers, attorneys, or other advocates. Cast a wide net when considering who to ask for a letter of support.

A letter of support should include the letter writer's name, age, occupation (if applicable), and relationship to your client. The letter should be signed, dated and addressed to the Board in some way (See "[Appendix 1: Sample Parole Packet](#)" below for a Sample Letter of Support).

A letter of support is likely deeply personal and different letter writers can highlight different facets of your client's eligibility for parole. Some suggestions for inclusion in the letter are:

- Details about your client pre-incarceration
- Description of your client: What makes them special? Why does the letter writer value having your client in their life? What are their traits or characteristics? How are they known in their family or community?
- How often they've communicated or visited with your client while they are incarcerated
- Description of any difficulties in their family or community by not having them around
- Description of any programming, accomplishments, or other work your client has done
- Any perceived change or growth in your client
- Any perceived remorse or accountability from your client
- Any resources or support they can offer your client (housing, employment, financial support)
- Their belief that your client should get parole, that they are more than their criminal history, and that the letter writer is hopeful that your client will be able to reunite with their family and community

## Client Personal Statement

A personal statement is a critical component of effective parole advocacy, serving as the client's direct voice to the Parole Board. It provides an opportunity for the individual to express genuine remorse, take accountability for past actions, demonstrate insight into the impact of their offense, and highlight their growth. A well-crafted personal statement can humanize the client, highlight their growth and rehabilitation, and convey their readiness to successfully reintegrate into the community. It allows the client to share their journey in their own words—showcasing not only the work they've done while incarcerated but also their goals, support systems, and plans for the future.

Your client can use the statement to give personal history, talk about their childhood, share information about their family, talk about their accomplishments while incarcerated, and/or their future plans and goals for their release. Your client can reflect on their underlying crime and how they've changed during their incarceration (if they feel they have). They can talk about why they want and need to go home. In short, the personal statement is a request for release. Given that the Commissioners are unlikely to read the entire packet carefully, the statement should be relatively concise and showcase what matters most to your client.

You should leave time for multiple drafts of the personal statement. If your client is comfortable doing so, this is something you can work on and refine together. When reviewing the personal statement, consider how the Board might view or interpret the statement (while careful not to discourage the client from sharing their strengths and truth). Consider how you will integrate the personal statement into your advocacy letter.

## Your Advocacy Letter: Purpose and Structure

A parole advocacy letter, written by you, should utilize the components discussed above and present a compelling case for why your client should be granted parole. It serves as a persuasive document to the parole

board, highlighting your client's rehabilitation, remorse, readiness for reintegration, and community support. It also acts as a summary of the supporting documents in the rest of the packet. Because it acts as a summary, the advocacy letter is likely to be one of the last things you will complete before sending the packet off.

Often, they are 4-6 pages and organized chronologically, starting with the applicant's early life, through to the reason for incarceration and ending with accomplishments in prison and release plans. They should pull out compelling and important quotes from the client's personal statement and letters of support. They can include photos of your client, their family, and/or friends.

## Components of the Advocacy Letter

### 1. Introduction

- **Purpose of the Letter:** State that the purpose of the letter is to advocate for the client's parole and to provide an overview of why the client should be considered for early release.

### 2. Background Information

- **Offense and Sentencing:** Provide a brief description of the offense for which your client was convicted, including any mitigating circumstances. Acknowledge the harm caused but also highlight any positive changes or personal growth since the conviction.
- **Client Background:** If the client is comfortable sharing, provide background of the client's childhood, upbringing, or other history that contributed to where they are.
- **Incarceration History:** Outline the length of time served and any significant achievements during incarceration (e.g., education, work programs, or therapeutic interventions).

### 3. Rehabilitation Efforts

- **Programs and Education:** Detail the programs the client has participated in, such as educational courses, vocational training, or rehabilitation programs (e.g., anger management, substance abuse treatment).
- **Work and Vocational Achievements:** Highlight any job assignments, work skills, and responsibilities undertaken by the client, demonstrating their commitment to rehabilitation.
- **Personal Development:** Emphasize any personal growth or positive changes in character that demonstrate the client is no longer a threat to public safety. This could include remorse, empathy for victims, and steps taken to address past behavior.

### 4. Support System and Future Plans

- **Family and Community Support:** Include quotes from letters of support. These testimonies can underscore the positive environment your client will return to upon release.
- **Employment or Housing Plans:** If applicable, include any arrangements for post-release employment, housing, or community reintegration programs that demonstrate your client's preparedness for successful reintegration.

### 5. Closing

- Reiterate why the client is ready for parole, emphasizing rehabilitation, growth, and readiness to contribute positively to society.
- Appeal to the parole board's mission to assess not only the past, but also the person your client is today, showing that they no longer pose a threat.

## Apology Letter

DOCCS maintains an “Apology Letter Bank” where people can submit letters for any victims or members of any victim’s family. Discuss with your client if they have written a letter already, and the benefits or drawbacks of writing one now. This can be a sensitive subject as you do not want to give the impression to your client that you expect them to write a letter or that there is any judgement about not having written one. Your client may not know that the Bank exists. A letter is by no means necessary for a parole packet, and a letter submitted to the Bank right before the interview could look disingenuous. If your client has previously written an apology letter, you should add this letter to the packet and ensure that their personal statement is aligned with the prior letter.

## Letters of Reasonable Assurance

Some community organizations will write “Letters of Reasonable Assurance” that confirm that they are willing to work with your client after their release. These organizations can provide guidance, community support, counseling, or other resources. If your client is interested, you can research reentry organizations and other community groups in their area that may be able to write these letters.

## Compiling and Sending the Final Parole Packet

When compiling the final version of your client’s parole packet, the most compelling and important documents should be at the beginning. The Board is highly unlikely to read the entire packet. Typically, the advocacy letter first, the client’s personal statement second, and letters of support third. Consider which documents best support your client’s narrative of rehabilitation and put those first. Maybe your client doesn’t have particularly compelling letters of support, but they do have assured housing and employment. Maybe one particular letter of support is most convincing or is from a correctional officer. You don’t have to use every document or letter that you obtained. This final step is to determine how best you want to present your client’s story to the Board.

We recommend binding the packet in some way so documents don’t fall out or get lost when mailing and transporting them. You should mail 3 copies of the packet to the Supervising ORC at least two weeks before the interview date (expedited mail with a tracking number is best, if possible). If you don’t know who the SORC is, ask the ORC and let them know you’re sending the packets directly to the SORC. 5-7 days before the interview, call the facility and ask for the SORC to ensure they have it and it’s being sent to the Board.

# III. Preparing for the Parole Hearing

## Client Preparation

1. **Understand the Process:** Help your client understand the structure of the parole hearing and what to expect. This reduces anxiety and prepares them to speak clearly and confidently. (See section “**Parole Hearing**” below for details about the structure of the hearing).
2. **Review Key Points:** Discuss the key points that will be raised in the hearing, including rehabilitation efforts and the case for release. Help them develop talking points that emphasize their growth and readiness for reintegration.

3. **Emotional Readiness:** Encourage your client to express remorse, accountability, empathy, and convey how they've worked to change since their conviction. **Affirm your role as a client's advocate;** it could very likely feel disingenuous for a client to express remorse and growth, especially if they disagree with the record that is before the board. Reflect on how to affirm your client's truth while also working together towards the goal of parole.
4. **Mock Hearings:** Schedule 1-2 mock hearings wherein you roleplay as Board Commissioner so that your client is better prepared for questions the Board may ask. (See "**Appendix 2: Mock Interview Guide**" below). During mock hearings, reassure your client that you know this can be difficult and painful, but that you have confidence in them. You want to be helpful in preparing them but still be encouraging.

## Strategy for the Hearing

- **Time is short:** The hearing is likely to last around 10-20 minutes in total. The time your client has to answer questions thoughtfully and completely, as well as make their case, will be shorter than that. Decide with your client beforehand what are the main points you want to present. Your client will not be able to address everything in the packet, and that's okay.
- **Present a Cohesive Argument:** The goal is to present a coherent and compelling narrative that shows your client has changed and is ready for reintegration. Use the advocacy letter as a basis for the client's testimony, ensuring all points are addressed in the hearing.
- **Highlight the Positive:** Emphasize the client's efforts to address past behavior and demonstrate personal growth. Though some topics in the interview may be painful and upsetting, encourage your client to include positive, hopeful, insightful, or reflective statements in their answers.
- **Address the Parole Board's Concerns:** Be prepared to address any concerns raised by the Board, such as the risk to public safety or lack of family support. Offer evidence that mitigates these concerns.
- **Lean on the Parole Packet:** Encourage your client to bring their own copy of their parole packet and review the packet beforehand to prepare. They can even bring their personal statement or notes to have in front of them if they get nervous (though be careful of sounding rehearsed or having a script). They've done a lot of work up to this point in telling their story – use it!
- **Addressing Inaccuracies:** Discuss with your client beforehand how to address any inaccuracies that might come up during the hearing. Respectfully correcting a fact ("I know the COMPASS Report shows I have no siblings, but I actually have two sisters I'm very close to") is very different from relitigating prior events, especially related to the underlying crime. Discuss and practice which kinds of inaccuracies to address and which to let go.
- **Remain calm and Respectful:** While your client is expected to remain deferential and composed, the Commissioners are permitted to be accusatory and even angry (it all depends on the specific style of the lead Commissioner). Though it will likely be difficult, advise your client to try to remain calm, respectful, and non-defensive. It's okay to ask Commissioners to repeat the question or for further clarification.

## IV. The Parole Hearing

### Parole Hearing Structure

1. **Greeting the Commissioners:** There will be 2-3 commissioners, likely over videoconference, but only one commissioner will take the lead. Your client should not be worried if they don't even hear from the other two beyond introducing themselves – this is typical.

2. **Opening Statement:** The hearing generally starts with an opening statement by the Parole Board panel, explaining the process and what they will evaluate.
3. **Review of Case File:** The board will review the individual's case, which includes their criminal record, rehabilitation efforts, and institutional behavior. This is where they will ask your client direct questions.
4. **Incarcerated Person Testimony:** The incarcerated person may have the opportunity to testify or make statements about their rehabilitation efforts, future plans, and readiness for release. This will likely be through an open-ended question at the end, like: "Is there anything else you would like us to know?"
5. **Deliberation and Decision:** The parole board will deliberate and decide whether to grant parole.

## Post-Hearing Actions

After the hearing, your client will receive a written decision granting or denying parole. This decision can take anywhere from a few days after the hearing to a few weeks. Keep the IMLP team informed of the parole decision. Even if parole is granted, your client will not be released immediately, normally not for at least a few months after the decision. You may be in a position to advocate for the client with their ORC or other reentry services before they are actually released. If parole is denied, provide guidance on the next steps, including the possibility of appealing or reapplying.

## Conclusion

Parole advocacy is a crucial part of helping individuals reintegrate following incarceration. As a volunteer attorney, your role is to provide your client with the best possible chance for a successful hearing by drafting a well-reasoned parole advocacy letter tailored to the audience, preparing your client for the hearing, and ensuring they have the tools to present a compelling case for their release. By ensuring that your client is well-prepared and supported for this process, this work can have an immensely positive impact on the client's and their family's lives.

Please reach out to Stephanie Taylor ([staylor@volspobono.org](mailto:staylor@volspobono.org)) or Liv Pickard ([opickard@volspobono.org](mailto:opickard@volspobono.org)) with any questions or concerns throughout the process. The IMLP team will schedule regular check-ins with you throughout the parole case.

## Appendix 1: Sample Parole Packet

Note that this sample parole packet is an amalgamation of multiple real parole packets, though all identifying information has been changed. Please excuse any inconsistencies in facts or circumstances. Not all exhibits in the index are included as samples. The sample includes:

1. Sample Cover Page and Index
2. Sample Advocacy Letter
3. Sample Personal Statement
4. Sample Letter of Support
5. Sample Inmate Academic Program Assignment
6. Sample Disciplinary History
7. Sample Certificate of Completion of Parenting Workshop

Please note – ***especially for the Personal Statement Sample*** – that these documents do not have to exactly express the statements in the sample documents. Every parole packet will look different, and each client will tell their individual story. Your client is an expert in their own experiences and future goals. These samples are merely guidelines for what the packet may look like.

[FIRST AND LAST NAME]

Submission to the Board of Parole

Department of Corrections and Community Supervision

[DATE OF HEARING]

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## Sample Advocacy Letter

*“Hey Mom Hope you know I miss you so much and I can’t wait for you to come home...I have dreamt about you and last night I had a dream and you came to see all of us. These dreams feel so real when I’m asleep that when I wake up I look around the house. That’s how real they feel in my head at night.”*

**Daughter of Jane Doe**  
(Exhibit 8)

*“Jane Doe has always been a dedicated and loving mother, and her children deeply miss her presence in their lives. They require her support, guidance, and nurturing, which are essential to their emotional and physical well-being. Her absence has been particularly challenging for them and their stability is at risk without her involvement.”*

**Sister of Jane Doe**  
(Exhibit 6)

*“I am writing you to support the release of incarcerated individual Jane Doe. I have known Ms. Doe since her arrival at Bedford Hills in 2021. Throughout these years, I have seen Ms. Doe excel and be a leader amongst her peers. I have had the opportunity to have conversations with her where I have personally seen her growth and compassion toward others and hear of her remorse for her actions. I see that Ms. Doe is ready to return as a productive member of society and be a mother to her children.”*

**Commendable Behavior Report of Correction Officer**  
(Exhibit 3)

This packet is respectfully submitted in support of Ms. Jane Doe’s application for parole. Her interview is currently scheduled for [MONTH DAY, YEAR]. This is her first appearance before the Board.

## **I. Summary**

Jane Doe pled guilty to criminal contempt in the 1<sup>st</sup> degree for violating an Order of Protection (OOP) when she engaged in an altercation with her ex-husband, John Doe, in the presence of one of her children. She was sentenced to 1 to 3 years of incarceration.

We respectfully submit that Ms. Doe is an ideal candidate for release on parole. Ms. Doe accepts full responsibility for her offense and has deep remorse for her actions. She understands that she both violated the law and acted inappropriately in front of her child.

*“[QUOTE FROM PERSONAL STATEMENT]”*

— Jane Doe, Letter to the Board (Exhibit 1)

During her time in prison, Ms. Doe has worked extremely hard to become a more responsible and accountable person. She has taken courses on parenting, completed training in cosmetology, and taken college courses through the Bard College program. Through this work, she has developed the skills and self-confidence to contribute to her family and community after release, and to ensure that she will never re-offend. Ms. Doe’s readiness for release is further demonstrated by her perfect disciplinary record, and the remarkable letters of support provided by Correctional Officers at Bedford Hills that are attached as Exhibits 3 and 4.

Upon release, Ms. Doe plans to move back into Section 8 housing with her children. Ms. Doe’s children desperately need their mother back in their lives. Ms. Doe also plans to care for her ailing mother, who is battling breast cancer. She plans to continue working at a nursing home in CITY which she worked at prior to her incarceration. Her supervisor confirmed that they would be able to rehire her upon reentry.



## **II. Ms. Doe’s History of Family Trauma and Domestic Violence**

Jane Doe is [X] years old, and a single mother of three children: [NAMES AND AGES]. Ms. Doe has put a significant focus on parenting during her incarceration. Her children are her top priority, and she wants to be the best parent possible for them. Part of her motivation is the trauma and abuse that she herself experienced as a child, which had a profound impact on her life.

Ms. Doe's life has been a difficult one. She was born in [CITY] in a household with very little stability. She lived with her mother and brother. Her childhood was marked by her mother's drug addiction and her father's absence. As she writes in her letter to the Board:

*“Growing up in my family wasn't easy. My mother was a drug addict and often wasn't around. My father was in prison, and my brother was in and out of jail. I had to grow up too fast.”*

— Jane Doe, Letter to the Board (Exhibit 1)

In an effort to escape this turmoil and trauma, Ms. Doe left her mother's home at 13 years old. She moved in with her paternal grandmother, who raised her from that point forward, but who has since passed away. When she was 20, she married her now ex-husband John Doe. Mr. Doe is the father of her two youngest children. Mr. Doe was verbally abusive to both Ms. Doe and her children. Despite this, upon their divorce, they received joint custody of the two youngest children.

The persistent conflict between Ms. Doe and her ex-husband formed the background to Ms. Doe's criminal offense. Although she knows that this is no excuse for her crime, when Ms. Doe violated an Order of Protection by engaging in an altercation with her ex-husband, she was attempting to retrieve her children from Mr. Doe's home.

### **III. Ms. Doe's Full Acceptance of Responsibility and Rehabilitation**

Ms. Doe accepts full responsibility for her unlawful actions. She also understands that her actions separated her from her children. She is committed to ensuring this never happens again.

During her time in prison, Ms. Doe has learned to calm herself down in triggering situations, such as dealing with her ex-husband and addressing the welfare of her children. Ms. Doe understands that difficult circumstances will continue to arise after her release, and she is confident that she now has the tools to handle them calmly and responsibly.

While incarcerated, Ms. Doe has worked extremely hard to make herself a better person and a better mother. She has taken every opportunity to improve herself. As she writes in her letter to the Board:

*“While incarcerated I took as many parenting programs as I could. I also enrolled in RTA (Rehabilitation through the Arts), Paint Shop, ASAT, and ART. I learned how to do cosmetology and now I work in the Discipline office, a job placement that requires me to have a good disciplinary record.”*

— Jane Doe, Personal Statement (Exhibit 1)

[SOCIAL WORKER], in her letter to the Board, describes Ms. Doe's work during incarceration:

*“She has actively participated in various programs, weekly Bible studies, and worship services, which have played a significant role in reshaping her*

*priorities ... [S]he recognizes the importance of being a positive role model for her children and a responsible citizen in society.” (Exhibit 9)*

Ms. Doe’s sister has noticed the profound change during her incarceration:

*“[M]y sister has continued to grow, accept her responsibilities and learn from her unfortunate mistakes ... She has allowed herself to accept her sentence, and to mold her path for the future as a woman who she can not only admire and be proud of, but also who her children and society will admire.” (Exhibit 6)*

#### **IV. Ms. Doe’s Release Plan**

Ms. Doe has been approved for Section 8 Housing in [CITY], for herself and her children. Her sister has also been assisting in communication with the housing authority and has confirmed that her housing is approved and ready.

Ms. Doe plans to resume work in a nursing home for full-time employment. Her prior employer has confirmed that they are able to re-hire her, despite her felony conviction. Ms. Doe is also currently in the intake process for [NON-PROFIT], a career readiness program that helps participants prepare for a living-wage, long-term career.

For all the foregoing reasons, we respectfully request that the Board grant Jane Doe discretionary release on parole.

Respectfully submitted,

[YOUR NAME AND SIGNATURE]  
[ROLE, INSTITUTION]  
[CONTACT INFO]

## Sample Personal Statement

Dear Members of the Parole Board:

I, Jane Doe, am writing to respectfully request a review of my case and consideration for my release from prison. I have three children, [NAMES AND AGES], who need their mother. I understand the seriousness of my past actions and the harm they caused, especially to my family.

I understand the gravity of my crime. On [DATE] I made a very poor decision – I violated an Order of Protection and got into an altercation with my ex-husband in front of my children. I was sentenced to one to three years in prison for felony criminal contempt. By making this terrible choice I hurt my children, who really needed me, by getting myself incarcerated. It is hard for them to understand that my actions that day are the reason I am here. I should've reacted differently.

During my incarceration, I have worked to become the best person I can be. This includes participating in many programs that have helped me understand the events from my life that led me to prison. None of this is an excuse for my crime, but I had a lot of trauma in my life. I was neglected as a child and then abused in my relationships with men as an adult.

I was born in [CITY]. Growing up in my family wasn't easy. I lived with my mother and brother. My mother was a drug addict and often wasn't around. My father was in prison when I was a young child, and my brother was in and out of jail. This caused me to grow up too fast. I moved out of my mother's house at the age of 13 and went to live with my grandmother. When she passed away, I was devastated.

At 20, I married John Doe, my now ex-husband. I had my two youngest children with him. He yelled at me and my kids every day. He constantly called me names and threatened me. When we finally got divorced, I was very upset when I had to share custody of my two youngest with him. Even though I didn't agree with the custody situation, I should not have broken the Order of Protection to pick my kids up. I should not have gotten into an altercation with him in front of the children.

I often think about how I let my own kids down. I feel like I have missed too much in my kids' lives. I have missed birthdays, graduations, and holidays – moments I will never be able to regain. My children rely on me for love, care, and support, and I deeply regret the hardship my actions have caused them. My children have been struggling without having me in their lives. I know that this is my own fault. However, I have tried to parent as well as I can from prison. I talk to my children almost every day and keep up with their schoolwork, activities, and medical decisions.

While incarcerated I took as many parenting programs as I could. I've completed multiple parenting classes with Hour Children. I also enrolled in RTA (Rehabilitation through the Arts), Paint Shop, ASAT, and ART. I learned how to do cosmetology and now I work in the Discipline office, a job placement that requires me to have a good disciplinary record. I've also been taking Bard College classes and I hope to get a college degree one day. Through my time here, I've become more confident in knowing myself and my value as a person. I think I can now

identify early signs of an unhealthy relationship. I plan to continue therapy upon my release to make sure that I keep working on staying away from these relationships. I would also like to keep going to parenting classes because I need help with my kids and I want to be the best mother I can be.

Upon my release, I have Section 8 housing under my name, so I will be able to move into an apartment when I get out. I also have plans for employment when I am released. The nursing home I used to work for assured me that they would rehire me back after I am released. I am also planning to get counseling and career support through [NON-PROFIT], which will help me move forward with my personal growth. I am not underestimating the challenges of reentry but I do want to support myself and my children as soon as I can.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe

## Sample Letter of Support

[FIRST NAME AND LAST NAME]

[ADDRESS]

[PHONE NUMBER]

[CORRECTIONAL FACILITY NAME]

[SORC NAME]

[CORRECTIONAL FACILITY MAILING ADDRESS]

RE: Letter of Support for [NAME OF APPLICANT, DIN #]

Dear Commissioners of the Board of Parole,

My name is [NAME]. I am writing you about my daughter/sister/friend [OR HOW YOU KNOW EACH OTHER], [NAME][DIN], who is going up for parole on [DATE]. She has served [LENGTH OF TIME IN OF] a one-to-three-year sentence. This is her first time going up for parole.

I work as a [OCCUPATION] at [COMPANY/ORGANIZATION] in the [LOCATION] area and have done so for the past [NUMBER] years. When I first learned about my daughter's crime, I was/I felt/I thought...

Since my daughter was incarcerated, I have spoken with her...

While she has been incarcerated, I have seen her express true remorse for what she has done. I believe she will not make the same choices again. Since she has been incarcerated, she has participated in so many programs and activities to become a better person and mother...[PROGRAMS/ACTIVITIES]

If she is released, my daughter will stay with me until she moves into her Section 8 Housing in [CITY]. She is also returning to her job at [EMPLOYER]. She has always enjoyed working there, and I am grateful that [EMPLOYER] recognizes her hard work and will rehire her.

Our family is ready to support her if she is released. Her kids are so excited to see their mother again. Thank you so much for reading this, and for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[NAME]

SEDU002

ACADEMIC EDUCATION  
SUMMARY PROFILE

\*FPMS\*

PAGE 001

DIN  
DOB



RECP DEGREE HS DIPLOMA  
DOCS DEGREE

06

LATEST TEST

HSE

TAB D READ V C 02.9 T 02.9 CUM  
07/21 MATH C 02.7 P 05.0 T 03.4 LATE

RECPT

LANG DOMINANCE ENGLISH

ESL N BEST PLUS NA

COUNTY OF RESIDENCE WESTCHESTER

ADMISSION DATE 07/07/2021

PROG	FAC	FROM DATE	TO DATE	HRS ATTEND
ABE ALL CONT	251	09/10/21	09/24/21	0015

CURRENT FACILITY: 250 - TACONIC

DIN: [REDACTED] NAME: [REDACTED]

TITLE ASAT PARTICIPANT SHOP ASAT (3) END REASON:	ITEM 754219 FROM 05/27/24 TO	FAC TACONIC	P.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE ADMINISTRATIVE CLERK SHOP ADMIN BLDG (1) END REASON:	ITEM 100401 FROM 05/13/24 TO	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .2416 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE ASAT PARTICIPANT SHOP ASAT (3) END REASON: LATERAL PROGRAM CHANGE	ITEM 754219 FROM 05/20/24 TO 05/26/24	FAC TACONIC	P.M.	\$ .0000 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE UNKNOWN SHOP UNEMPLOYED/UNASSIGNED (1) END REASON: REACHED ON WAITING LIST	ITEM 041228 FROM 02/12/24 TO 05/12/24	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .0750 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE INDUSTRIES WORKER I SHOP IND. FOOD SERVICE-NON TRAINING END REASON: REMOVED FOR LENGTH OF STAY	ITEM 922022 FROM 11/27/23 TO 02/11/24	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .2200 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PORTER II SHOP E BLOCK (1) END REASON: INAPPROPRIATE PLACEMENT	ITEM 119209 FROM 02/27/23 TO 05/26/24	FAC TACONIC	EVENING	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE INDUSTRIES WORKER I SHOP IND. FOOD SERVICE-NON TRAINING END REASON: LATERAL PROGRAM CHANGE	ITEM 922022 FROM 10/24/22 TO 11/26/23	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .1600 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PORTER II SHOP ADMIN BLDG (2) END REASON: LATERAL PROGRAM CHANGE	ITEM 101211 FROM 04/04/22 TO 02/26/23	FAC TACONIC	P.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PORTER II SHOP ADMIN BLDG (2) END REASON: LATERAL PROGRAM CHANGE	ITEM 101203 FROM 02/28/22 TO 10/23/22	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE THERAPEUTIC PARTICIPANT II SHOP AGGRESSION REPLC TRNG END REASON: SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED PROGRAM	ITEM 793208 FROM 11/22/21 TO 02/27/22	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PORTER II SHOP ADMIN BLDG (2) END REASON: REACHED ON WAITING LIST	ITEM 101203 FROM 10/04/21 TO 11/21/21	FAC TACONIC	A.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__

CURRENT FACILITY: 250 - TACONIC

DIN: [REDACTED] NAME: [REDACTED]

TITLE STUDENT SHOP PAINTING END REASON: SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED PROGRAM	ITEM 423214 FROM 09/20/21 TO 04/03/22	FAC TACONIC P.M.	\$ .1750 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE STUDENT SHOP ABE I (2) END REASON: INAPPROPRIATE PLACEMENT	ITEM 501204 FROM 09/13/21 TO 10/03/21	FAC TACONIC A.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PHASE I TS SHOP PHASE I TS END REASON: SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED PROGRAM	ITEM 690904 FROM 09/13/21 TO 09/19/21	FAC TACONIC P.M.	\$ .1000 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PORTER II SHOP E BLOCK (1) END REASON: LATERAL PROGRAM CHANGE	ITEM 119202 FROM 08/16/21 TO 09/12/21	FAC TACONIC A.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE PORTER II SHOP E BLOCK (1) END REASON: REACHED ON WAITING LIST	ITEM 119206 FROM 08/16/21 TO 09/12/21	FAC TACONIC P.M.	\$ .1583 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE UNKNOWN SHOP FACILITY ORIENTATION END REASON: SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED PROGRAM	ITEM 036228 FROM 08/09/21 TO 08/15/21	FAC TACONIC AM/PM	\$ .0750 MTWTFSS YYYYY__
TITLE INDUSTRIES WORKER I SHOP IND. FOOD SERVICE-NON TRAINING END REASON: AUTO CLOSED BY LOCATOR FILE	ITEM 922907 FROM 07/19/21 TO 08/05/21	FAC BEDFORD HILLS RECEPTION AM/PM	\$ .1600 MTWTFSS YYYYY__

[REDACTED] SDCP008

INMATE DISCIPLINARY HISTORY

\*FPMS\*

PAGE 004

NO DISCIPLINARY HISTORY TO PRINT FOR FACILITY TACONIC FEM FOR INMATE [REDACTED]

NOTE: ONLY COMPLETED HEARINGS ARE SHOWN

\*\*\*SUCCESSFUL PRINT COMPLETION\*\*\*

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[Redacted]

has successfully completed the workshop:

## Parenting

[Redacted] thru [Redacted]

Step by Step workshops are highly-structured programs with strict requirements for participation, homework, attendance and sharing in the group. Women who complete this eight week session program have worked hard to develop effective parenting skills.

With great pride, we acknowledge [Redacted] completion of this workshop.

[Redacted]

Step by Step, Facilitator

*The mission of Step by Step is to empower women who are, have been, or are at risk of being incarcerated to claim their strengths and build healthy lives for themselves and their families.*

*Step by Step is an outreach program of Volunteers of America Upstate New York*

## Appendix 2: Mock Interview Guide

The average duration of a parole hearing in New York is 15 minutes. The Board will hear many different parole cases on the day, one after the other. It is important to prepare your client not only for the questions they may receive, but potential challenges they may face (e.g. the Commissioners' attitudes, technical issues with videoconferencing, painful topics, inaccuracies, being cut off). Reassure your client that you are confident in their abilities and that they can only do their best. Strongly emphasize and encourage their good answers and tactfully point out where their answers could use some adjusting. Pay particular attention to any answers or phrasing that the Board may interpret as evading accountability or being defensive.

The Board is likely to pull at least some questions from the client's PSR/PSI and/or sentencing minutes. They will hopefully have read the parole packet, at least partially, and have follow-up questions from the packet. Common topics for questions in the interview include: the underlying criminal offense, including what happened and why; any previous convictions; the circumstances of the client's life before incarceration; the client's disciplinary history while incarcerated; programming; future goals; release plans; family and community support. The hearing may conclude with an open-ended: "Is there anything else you want us to know?"

### Sample Questions

- How are you today?
- What did/do you do for work?
- How far did you get in school?
- Do you have any children?
- Why did you [insert fact from crime]?
- Who else was involved in your crime?
- Who else was present for the crime?
- Who was the victim of your crime?
- Why didn't you [take a different course of action]?
- You said that you were high/drunk during the offense. Why did you use drugs or alcohol?
- Will you continue using drugs or alcohol if you are released?
- Do you have any mental health diagnosis?
- Are you on any medication?
- Do you have a temper?
- Have you had any disciplinary issues while here?
- How do we know you won't do this again upon release?
- What were you thinking when you committed the crime? What was going through your mind?
- What would you say if you could speak to the victim or their family?
- What have you learned from [substance treatment program/parenting program/anger management]?
- Why should this panel grant you parole?
- Do you think you've served enough time?
- Do you understand that you have to make better decisions in the future?
- If released, where would you live/work?
- Are you on good terms with your family?
- Are you currently in a romantic relationship with anyone?

- Do you have anything else to add?
- Do you think you were given a fair hearing?

### **Appendix 3: Links to Other Resources**

- [DOCCS Parole Board Calendar](#)
- [DOCCS Incarcerated Lookup](#)
- [DOCCS Parole Board Webpage](#)
- [DOCCS Directives Listing](#)
- [Parole Prep Project: A Guide to Parole Preparation in New York State](#)
- [Jailhouse Lawyer's Manual, Chapter 32: Parole](#)