

Reform of Rockefeller Drug Laws Takes Another Small Step in Right Direction

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

Thanks to the incredible support of Alliance members and allied organizations, who sent hundreds of letters to the Governor in support of the bill, advocates for reforming New York's harsh Rockefeller Drug Laws (RDL) inched a little closer to the ultimate goal of a full repeal of the laws.

Last night, Governor Pataki signed a bill into law that will allow an estimated 540 people convicted of drug offenses under the RDLs to apply for resentencing and possibly leave prison early. The RDLs give first time nonviolent drug offenders the same penalties as those convicted of murder and harsher penalties than those convicted of rape. Additionally, a staggering 93% of the 16,000 people locked up under the draconian Rockefeller Drug Laws are black and Latino.

"We took two steps forward with the reforms in December, and one more step yesterday," said Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance. "But we still have ten steps more to go."

Last December, Governor Pataki signed a bill that allowed 446 people serving over 15 years to life on A1 felonies to petition for release after serving 8 ½ years. The new law signed yesterday builds on the December reforms by allowing people serving 7 years to life on A2 felonies to petition for release after serving 3 years.

While advocates and family members are encouraged by the small reforms, they are clear that the latest reforms don't impact the majority of people behind bars. Most people in prison on Rockefeller charges are lower-level or class-B felons and neither this law nor the changes enacted last year affect them. Moreover, the people who should have benefited from the initial reforms still find themselves behind bars as a result of an unnecessarily difficult resentencing process. Bill Gibney, a lawyer with the Legal Aid Society said, "The Governor and Legislature shouldn't pat themselves on the back until they've ensured that these reforms are duly acted upon."

Like the thousands of other mothers and proponents of reform, Cheri O'Donoghue wants even bigger changes to the RDLs.

"This will not help my son, or thousands like him who have B-class felonies. What is needed is the full repeal of the Rockefeller drug laws..." said O'Donoghue.

Though more work needs to be done, this new law rejuvenates the dedication of Real Reform supporters and helps to galvanize the movement to end the waste of lives and taxpayer dollars.

Members of the [Real Reform New York Coalition](#), which includes survivors of the Rockefeller drug laws, families of incarcerated people, advocates and experts, define real reform as reducing sentences; restoring judicial discretion; delivering retroactive sentencing relief; and expanding drug treatment programs.

For more information on the Rockefeller Drug Laws, [click here](#).