



"Social justice should be the underlying goal of all humanity."

-Alan V. Lowenstein, Institute Founder

**Testimony of Ronald Pierce,
New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
in support of S-2100 before the
New Jersey Senate State Government, Wagering,
Tourism & Historic Preservation Committee**

Thursday, January 31, 2019

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Good morning, Chairman Beach, Vice-Chair Cruz-Perez, and Senators Brown, Stack, and Thompson:

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story in support of S-2100, historic legislation that will restore the fundamental right to vote to nearly 100,000 people in prison, on parole, or on probation.

My name is Ronald Pierce. I am an armed forces veteran and a summa cum laude Rutgers University graduate. I am also the Democracy and Justice Fellow at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.

In 1986, because of my poor choices and mistakes, I went to prison. In 2016, after thirty years of incarceration, I came home. I am now on parole. Under New Jersey's law denying the right to vote to people with criminal convictions, I have been without a voice in our democracy for decades. The last time I cast a ballot was 1985.

Although I have been without a voice for more than thirty years, voting and civic engagement have always been and continue to remain important to me. I was raised to understand that both are the fundamental principles necessary for a healthy democracy, and that no one is exempt from his or her duties to their communities. My father—who helped build the Bayonne Little League field and organization with other community members—instilled in me that voting was not only my fundamental right, but it was my duty to our community. My vote gave voice to the community's concerns.

Today, I do volunteer work, participate on expert panels, and I have been published on the topics of incarceration and reentry. Prior to my incarceration, I voted in every election until I was no longer allowed by law to do so.

Currently, New Jersey denies the right to vote to anyone serving a sentence for a felony conviction, including people in prison, on parole, or on probation. In 2016, nearly 100,000 people were prohibited from exercising this most fundamental right. Some of those people are veterans like me.

Incarcerated veterans served our country by defending, protecting, and advancing this fundamental right of democracy—the very same right we are now denied.

This law strikes at the very heart of what it means to be a human being. What is a democracy if you do not have the right to vote? To strip an individual of their fundamental right to vote is to deny that individual their personhood. Ancient Greeks called it civic death.

To vote has value to the soul. It brings a connectedness with it.

The New Jersey Department of Corrections states that one of its goals is for people in prison to maintain connections to family and community as a means to promote successful reentry back into society. This premise is in direct conflict with the reality that taking away the right to vote disconnects people in prison from participation in community decisions that both directly and indirectly affect them and their families.

For incarcerated people, voting is an effective means of rehabilitation. When a person engages in meaningful dialogue about civic concerns, it opens them up to see beyond their personal needs and shifts their focus to issues that affect the community. While in prison, I saw this transformation occur in the students in my political science class. No longer were people in prison talking about individual issues, but, instead, they engaged in conversations about community issues, school curricula, community resource funding, and gas, taxes, and infrastructure. For this reason, studies show that voting helps to facilitate reentry and it reduces recidivism. In fact, withholding the right to vote to people with criminal convictions actually *undermines* these criminal justice aims.

I often tell those who I was incarcerated with, who are still imprisoned, that I will not forget about them, and I will fight for them. This is what I stand up for: the rights of those not only silenced, but buried beyond visibility.

New Jersey must end this anti-democratic practice and pass S-2100 to restore the right to vote to the nearly 100,000 people in prison, on parole, or on probation.

I look forward to the day when I can again walk proudly into a voting booth, cast my ballot, and stand side by side with my fellow community members knowing that my voice matters—the day when New Jersey hears the voices of those silenced for far too long, the voices of those living in prison, on parole, or on probation. The day that we declare that we are 1844 no more.

Let us vote. Our democracy demands it.