Lifers say no chance of parole leads to desperation

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Department of Corrections Secretary Richard Stalder enraged a victims’ group this spring when he suggested that prisoners over age 45 who had served a good stretch of time be traded out for younger, more violent “urban terrorists” who remain free because there is no room for them in parish jails.

Stalder and other corrections experts point out that most crimes are committed by young men, ages 15-25, and that past age 45 men are extremely unlikely to break the law.

After he made the suggestion, the group wrote Stalder to ask: “If your parents, spouse or children were killed by a criminal, would you still be making a recommendation that such criminals be released at the age of 45?”

Supporters of such a plan say there are also economic reasons for either releasing the older inmates to halfway houses or putting them in lower-security parish prisons: Older inmates, with the health problems that accompany older age, cost more money to imprison.

Of all 50 states, Louisiana has the highest number of inmates serving life sentences without parole. The latest criminal justice statistics show Louisiana had nearly 2,100 lifers in 1990. In second place was Pennsylvania, with nearly 2,000 lifers.

Pennsylvania has nearly three times the number of people Louisiana has.

Currently, Louisiana inmates serving life sentences are not eligible for parole. Pardons, which ultimately rest with the governor, are their only hope.

Norris Henderson, who is serving a life sentence at the state Penitentiary at Angola, said there is no system through which lifers can work toward release and that failure of the state to reform its life sentences leads to hopelessness and desperation.

“Even Sirhan Sirhan, Charles Manson, James Earl Ray, at least they are given a chance to go before a parole board,” he said. “They’ll never get out, but at least they get a hearing.”

“They have hope,” said Angola inmate Michael Glover, who is also serving a life sentence. “But hope is rapidly vanishing in this prison.”

At some point, if you evaluate a guy all along the way, set some goals for him, and see if he meets them. Evaluate him and if he meets the criteria after so many years, what’s the use of holding him?” Henderson asked.

“When does the time come when he can get another chance?” Stalder asked.

“He deserves another chance when I have somebody out there who doesn’t have a prison bed who has a very high probability of committing a violent crime. At that time I’m willing to take a chance on this one coming out.”

Louisiana does not need to “provide decades and decades of retribution,” the DOC secretary said.

Henderson pointed to the case of Pop Bickham, a 74-year-old lifer who has spent 33 years at Angola.

“Pop frightens me,” Henderson said. “He’s been here twice as long as I have and he’s twice as old as I am and I look at him and think, they can keep me here just as long.”

Lifers say it would be a different story if everybody were treated the same. Yet they point to the fact that some people serving life sentences get released after only a few years, thanks, they say, to political connections.

“You’ve got five professionals on the Pardon Board. They make a determination that then becomes a political decision. It goes to the governor and he’s got to decide if he can politically survive signing that pardon,” Glover said.

One of the most publicized pardon cases involves Wilbert Rideau, editor of Angola’s award-winning Angolite prison news magazine. The state Pardon Board has recommended clemency for Rideau on at least five occasions, but the recommendations always have stopped at the governor, who has bowed to the wishes of the survivors of Rideau’s crime and refused to sign a pardon.

Rideau has served 31 years in prison for a kidnapping and stabbing murder committed during an armed robbery that occurred when he was 19.

Retired District Court Judge Thomas Tanner, who heads the state Sentencing Commission, said that “one day lifers are going to have to be addressed.”

Most of the lifers released “don’t come right back,” Tanner said. “Unfortunately we only hear about the ones that do.

“Most people who commit murder, and I’m excepting the drug people, I’m talking about the guy who comes home and suspects his wife of infidelity and shoots her on the spot, he’s guilty of second-degree murder but when you get right down to it, those people are not going to kill again.”

“If they’ve served an extended period of time, you have to ask what is appropriate punishment for that crime?” University of Southwestern Louisiana criminal justice professor Burke Foster said. “You have to ask is the state’s mandate term wrong?”

Foster said despite calls for overhauling some of the state’s mandatory life terms, “Everybody sees a need for reform but the Legislature.”

Advocate staff photo by John H. Williams

Angola inmate Norris Henderson, left, said Louisiana’s sentencing laws offer no hope to prisoners serving life sentences. Both Henderson and Michael Glover, right, are serving life sentences.