**Soros Justice Fellowships-2022**

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“The South Carolina parole law creates no right to be released on parole. Parole in South Carolina is strictly a matter of privilege or grace. The South Carolina Board of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services has absolute discretion to grant or deny parole. As such, the publication of these parole criteria in no way creates an expectancy of release; nor does it bind the Parole Board in any way to favorable parole decisions or establish any presumptions of entitlement to parole.”

(South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services, 2021)

The above statement is the introduction of a one pager regarding parole criteria listed on the South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services (SCDPPP) website. Human redemption, dignity and condition has been reduced to a privilege or a task to be graced with regardless of effort or good works. My project is to put faces, names, and familial stories of just how human beings are negatively impacted by parole denials. Too often legislation and even research lack context due only dealing with research, numbers, and what for some legislators or even parole board members are hypothetical situations that they have never personally experienced or been close to. In Addition to narratives, families need assistance preparing themselves for the high and lows of the parole process. This project will focus on humanizing and resourcing through advocacy and tangible means a hidden portion of the community which is affected with every parole denial in the state of South Carolina. As it stands the offender have no familiar voice for them with the exception of paperwork and in contrast the prosecutor and victims have the expanded capacity to directly impact the parole’s board decision. Additionally making the situation more problematic during COVID-19 the offender may not even have the ability to appear at all and if there is no lawyer there is no voice on their side at all.

There are very few post incarceration attorneys that deal in parole and even if they are retained the percentage of success is still only 1 in 4 for non-violent offenders and even less for violent offenders. For this reason family members are often left to walk through the process of paperwork, finding employment and housing by themselves only to find that after the offender has gone before the Parole board, they received only five minutes and were denied within the hour. This community needs a platform to tell their story, assistance gathering what’s needed to apply for parole, and family counseling resources to walk them through possible denial or even in the happy circumstance of reunification of their loved one. The lasting artifact from these activities will be data from information gleaned from those coming through the system and their families and a support network with lasting resources.

Despite the parole approval rate being down 16,800 South Carolina has an incarceration rate of [678 per 100,000 people](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html) (including prisons, jails, immigration detention, and juvenile justice facilities), meaning that it locks up a higher percentage of its people than any democracy on earth.

In addition, Each year, [at least 89,000 different people](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/09/18/state-jail-bookings/) are booked into local jails in South Carolina.

* South Carolina **released fewer people on parole** in 2020 than they had in 2019, and approved a smaller percent of parole applications.
* South Carolina is **one of 13 states** that did not implement any policies to accelerate releases, promote medical parole or compassionate release, prevent incarceration for technical violations of probation and parole, or hasten releases for people incarcerated on minor offenses.

(Hough, P.A., 2020)

My personal experience having loved ones eligible and ineligible for parole within the South Carolina Department of Corrections has guided me in a certain part to my current profession of Executive Director of Black Liberation Fund (BLF), a local black justice organization. BLF began as a bail fund run on a grassroots level during the George Floyd protests in the Summer of 2020. Since then, I have guided the organization in becoming the first nonprofit, 501c3, charity bail fund in the state of South Carolina. Due to the nature of pending litigation, many times we are unable to provide real stories or narratives on how stressful the pre-incarceration process is and how often it ends in eventual incarceration within SCDC or federal prisons. The first time I had to pay a six-digit bail over 100k was one of the most surreal moments of my life. I saw how truly money, and privilege get and keep a person free if they are resourced and I believe this fellowship will allow me knit those affected the most in the midst of incarceration, a measure of hope and a lasting platform.

One of my oldest friends has literally spent his whole adult life within a system that believes he will never be eligible for the privilege, and by the same token another close friend with a non-violent offense and immense community support has been denied twice. In both cases the parole board will cite the nature of the crime which is unchangeable and unmovable despite rehabilitation or time. Both have ebbs and flows of hopefulness and hopelessness on the topic which can take on a tone of despair especially after COVID 19 caused serious shortages in programs and resources. I believe if we knit together the stories of so many other families who are consistently denied we can create a humanity which seems to be lacking systematically. We can do this through research, documenting personal experiences, creating our own patterning of what is included in a successful parole packet which is required for each person that goes up for parole, and even networking people to resources which will strengthen their petition to the SCDPPP. Eventually through this work we can create a system of oversight and accountability for the SCDPPP and eventually lead to SC changing the language in their policies to include parole as a right and not simply a privilege to be judged by governor appointees instead a collective of community members.

During this fellowship, I expect to continue my work with Black Liberation fund on a 10–15-hour consulting basis and transfer the bulk of current responsibilities to the Business Manager and current working board members. The staff is fully supportive of the fellowship in the aspect of the knowledge that can be gained from the learning opportunity as well as the final aspect of the community that will be built and resourced. In addition to that work, I am a parent to two boys. Those normal accommodations will need to be made from time to time.

Due to working with Black Liberation Fund and as a person with an incarcerated loved one, I believe that I have the rapport needed to collect the stories in a safe way so there is little retaliatory action to the offender. Black Liberation Fund will be housing many of our software platform needs in that regard and meeting space for one-on-one conversations. I believe the work is complementary to the host organization without duplicating the efforts and similar to BLF if successful will be a novel feat by an organization not national in nature and based on narratives locally.

Hough, P.A., A. R. (2020, April 1). *Understanding the parole system in South Carolina*. The Law Offices of A. Randolph Hough, P.A. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from https://www.houghlaw.com/blog/understanding-the-parole-system-in-south-carolina/