

June 8, 2008

Dear Senators and Governor Blagojevich;

Enough is enough! We are outraged over the recent debacle in the Illinois Senate regarding the makeup of the Illinois Prisoner Review Board. The actions taken by some Senators bent on removing law enforcement voices from the Prisoner Review Board are utterly offensive to the memory of the fallen heroes in Illinois Law Enforcement, and an absolutely unacceptable act of political manipulation and wielding of patronage that endangers the Illinois public, and the political reputations of those pressured into supporting such an effort.

The end result of the recent attempt to remove Mr. Salvador Diaz from the Prisoner Review Board, after last year's removal of John Stenson that was slipped through in secret, will be the release from Illinois Prisons of the "worst of the worst" -- "cop-killers" who are the few remaining indeterminately sentenced. Both Mr Stenson and Mr Diaz are former law enforcement officers. And interestingly, while their voting records have reflected diverse and balanced judgments about C number prisoners releases, both of them have been alike in the past in their general rejection of the release of those who have murdered law enforcement.

The enabling statutes of the PRB say that offenders cannot be released where the release will "deprecate the seriousness of the offense". American society places the highest possible value on the lives of fallen police officers for very good reason--quite simply, we cannot ask them day after day to risk their lives for us if we do not, in turn, covenant with them to hold anyone who would kill them to the absolute highest levels of accountability. Illinois' law enforcement put their lives on the line for their families and all of us every day. This calls for the very best from us.

The independent functions in law that are prescribed for the PRB to perform in their enabling statutes are threatened by a lack of balance in the makeup of the board, and public safety is threatened as well. The use of the Prisoner Review Board for placing patronage appointments is dangerous, highly unethical, and a violation of the public trust that elected officials take an oath to protect.

The PRB's makeup is described in this way in its enabling statutes, "The Board shall consist of 15 persons appointed by the Governor by and with the advice and consent of the Senate. One member of the Board shall be designated by the Governor to be Chairman and shall serve as Chairman at the pleasure of the Governor. The members of the Board shall have had at least 5 years of actual experience in the fields of penology, corrections work, law enforcement, sociology, law, education, social work, medicine, psychology, other behavioral sciences, or a combination thereof. At least 6 members so appointed must have had at least 3 years experience in the field of juvenile matters. No more than 8 Board members may be members of the same political party." It is clear that the law intends for the PRB members to have a balance of professional experience and expertise relevant to the functions of the board, and to also be balanced by perspective,

including political party, etc. It is very clear that this body cannot be politically influenced as it practices its “independent, quasi-judicial” function– too much is at stake.

We were also most disturbed to hear that the States Attorneys of this state, who have a very difficult, vital and often thankless job of keeping us all safe and holding criminals accountable, were “punished” by Senate leadership by the cutting of funds for the videotaping of interrogations for simply doing their jobs in this matter. We cannot make sense of this decision that also threatens the integrity of Illinois’ criminal justice system.

Organizations such as the John Howard Association used the removal of Mr. Stenson last year to trumpet their success in advocacy for prisoners. They publicly claimed to be instrumental in influencing the leader of Senate Executive Appointments Committee’s position on Mr. Stenson. With pressure now being wielded by these same members of the Senate to have favorite patronage appointments of their own made to the PRB, the whole process is beginning to lose credibility.

Convicted murderers and cop-killers, the unbelievably damaged families left behind, public safety, and the integrity of the State of Illinois’ entire criminal justice system are *not* political footballs to be played with in this manner.

The families of these fallen law enforcement heroes and their law enforcement colleagues, along with all murder victims families of C Number prisoners, have to go through a horrible, time-consuming, and re-traumatizing process for several months out of every year in most cases. They take off work; they gather petitions, signed by thousands of Illinois residents who care about law enforcement and public safety. They go to the prisons and to Springfield for hearings. They re-live the nightmare; opening the wounds again and again. They have had to fight this horrible process year after year after year. We owe them, at the very least, a process with some integrity.

We ask that the Governor appoint a comparable law enforcement member to fill Mr Stenson’s open spot. We also believe that the glaring lack of victim representation on the PRB must be addressed. We call upon all in the Senate to work to de-politicize such an important process and not use PRB appointments to advance their agendas in other areas. We ask your most sincere efforts to prevent patronage and political deal-making to be used when it comes to the Prisoner Review Board. We ask that the Senate not threaten funding for the vitally important work of the States Attorneys as a way of manipulating appointments to the Prisoner Review Board. We will be watching with great interest.