

NO WAY HOME

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The author denounces the parole system's default practice of forcing newly-released offenders into halfway houses—even when they have loving families and homes awaiting them.

Home is where the heart is. A place of sanctuary and safety, comfort and companionship, nourishment and nostalgia. An ever-treasured hearthstone where burdens of the day get left at the door. Little soothes the spirit more completely than a pleasant evening spent with kith and kin. To be sure, not many venues exist in this troubled world quite like that precious sanctum we've come to call our home.

But the Pennsylvania Parole System has different ideas.

There is some old wisdom that says something to this effect: Just do your time and go home. In one century, those words were exalted by citizen and outlaw alike. The system has changed, however, and that old school proverb has since dissolved into a hideous cesspool of overweening authority. Perhaps the slogan should now read: Just do your time—then go to another institution.

Today, the halfway house option is all the rage. Alternative residency is stipulated, even demanded, more than it is suggested. In an alarming number of cases, offenders are ordered to these places after their prison term is complete, even though these secondary measures are found to be unnecessary. Reportedly, some offenders even own their own homes and have families waiting, but are inevitably herded into these boardings under the foul whims of some obscure parole mandate.

If an offender is homeless, without reliable support systems, or possesses no means of adequate lodging—the halfway house alternative proves to be a crucial, indispensable resource. Some parolees need it, for good or ill, and have no other choice.

But some of us have a home and family, and do not need the option. Unfortunately, we are now seeing more sinister commissions and directives. Parole agencies have found an all new low, it would seem, yet another diabolical means of furthering the trauma of estrangement.

As if our families weren't alienated enough, the parole system now exerts their authority like some sadistic lover, prying apart our relationships with spiteful mechanism and cruel counterweight.

One might naturally presume that if an offender boasts solid and upright familial ties, and is free of domestic violence and other unsavory crimes—then that redeemed soul should be rightfully permitted an unrestricted pass back into the arms of waiting loved ones. Family members and children should expect nothing less from our country's penal system.

This is just not the reality, however.

As of late, our parole officials have been tossing those much-deserved homeplan applications like yesterday's news. Perhaps the extra paperwork is just too grueling? Just too strenuous? Perhaps their caseload is at the brimming point? Or, just maybe, the offender's last name brings back ugly schoolyard memories?

Whatever the case may be, men who have served their time, paid their dues and debts, are now being shipped off to alternative housing for a time indefinite. But, as fiendish as a parole agent's logic may very well be, a smart boy knows better than to question the motives of a monster. Especially when the knave in charge tends to manipulate freedom like some low rent hustler.

To deny a man his home and family is to deny him his livelihood. Only a baseborn tyrant with a heart steeped in hate could employ these tactics day after day and still somehow find enough self-respect to sleep restfully. Somewhere, somehow, our judicious machinery has blown an essential circuit. The warning lights of fairness and morality are faint and flickering.

Indeed.

The horrors of life in a halfway house are well known. "Drug havens"—as they have been called by state officials—crime centers rife with addiction and degeneracy. Unrepentant felons and lifelong dope fiends harbor no qualms with slithering in and out of these dens with any regularity. We haven't heard an abundance of success stories, or productive lifestyles originate from these quarters. More often than not, staff and personnel take wagers on how many arrests might transpire on any given week.

Compassion doesn't come cheap in the penal system these days. And it is the undeserving, non-violent, low-risk offender who will pay the price. However unjustly. These alternative wards are typically miles away—counties away, even—from old familiar stomping grounds. Nevertheless, the parolee is expected to secure gainful employment to pay their room and board.

Meanwhile ... their family suffers in waiting.

Some men create laws for the betterment of society. Men with wives, children, and loving families. But under these laws, reformed men cannot return back to families of their own. Home might be where the heart is, as they say, but the Pennsylvania Parole System doesn't care who lives there.