

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, Staff and Visitors:

My name is Vida Stallter. I live in Cheyenne, Wyoming, but I have a very personal interest in Senate Bill 20-076, and I thank you for the opportunity to voice my support.

My son, Vincent Rivera, was arrested in 1988, when he was 21 years old, and is currently serving a 40-to-Life sentence at the Colorado Department of Corrections. He has served 31 years of his sentence, which means he has 9 more years before he will be eligible for parole. Senate Bill 20-076 would provide him the opportunity to become eligible for a parole hearing if it is passed. We all know nothing is guaranteed with the Parole Board, but just being eligible for a hearing is encouraging.

I think we can all agree the law is not perfect. Most Colorado offenders earn time off of their sentences (up to 50%) for good behavior. Habitual offenders, repeat offenders and offenders serving time in Administrative Segregation are eligible to earn good time, while some first-time offenders are not. My son is not. If a sentence includes the words "to life" (one day to life or 40 years to life) the offender does not earn good time. I have long resented the inequality in sentencing. My son's co-defendant served a total of three years!

We were incredibly naïve when Vince was sentenced and did not realize this was a life sentence for our family as well. For the first 10 years of his incarceration we visited every other weekend. For the past 21 years, we have visited every third weekend and continue to do so to this day. And for the past 31 years, I have prayed every day that I will live long enough to watch my son walk out of prison.

Vince is my only child, and at the time of his conviction, his son was two years old. At that time, Vince couldn't comprehend that his son would grow up without his father. He couldn't envision that I would not be allowed to see my grandson and, in fact, I have not seen him in 30 years. I do believe that no person deserves to be the victim of a crime. However, in 1988, Vince could not grasp the impact his mistake would have on the family of the victim. A prolonged sentence for young offenders damages families in many, many ways and eliminates HOPE for the offender. What do we have without Hope? Young, immature offenders do not have the intellectual capacity to understand that consequences can be so severe.

It's a mistake to throw away the key on young offenders. Senate Bill 20-076 is a step in the right direction.

The Colorado Department of Corrections, along with the Governor's office, is currently exploring several avenues to get well-behaved, long term offenders paroled. Even they don't see the benefit of continuing to keep these men locked up. Vince has very positive reports from the Department of Corrections staff members, and during his incarceration has availed himself of numerous programs, trained service dogs for Canine Companions for Independence, and has educated himself and is proficient on computers, including programming. He has grown and matured in a positive manner while incarcerated despite the inherent obstacles of incarceration. The Colorado Department of Corrections has contributed to Vince's maturity and progression by making various programs available to him and others. These programs have been instrumental in producing the positive, constructive men that they are today. Upon release, he can continue that growth by giving back to society in a multitude of favorable ways.

This Bill would provide my son an opportunity to prove he can be a productive citizen while he is still young enough to do so. He is no longer an angry young man or a threat, but rather is a mature, responsible adult that has family and financial support to aid in his transition if paroled. He has the incentive to do the right thing for the remainder of his life and is the perfect candidate for a Long Term Offender Program or parole under any program. He is unwilling to re-offend and would be an excellent example that young offenders can become decent, respectable, law-abiding individuals.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity and encourage you to support Senate Bill 20-076, for my family and for other families just like mine. In the words of a well-known actor, "We are at our best when we guide each other toward redemption." I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for granting me this opportunity to address the Committee. My name is Vincent Rivera and I am serving a sentence of 40 years to Life for the 1988 aggravated robbery and murder of Mr. Carmine Lombardi. I recently completed my 31<sup>st</sup> year in the Colorado Department of Corrections and am writing in support of SB 20-076 as a living example of a young man that made a horrible choice in a split second,. The mental and emotional growth that I have achieved is what I wish to present to you today, proving that I am more than just a Colorado Department of Corrections file number. I am an individual that possesses the ability to recognize the changes that have occurred as I have matured, respecting life and what comes with it.

What I learned very quickly was the enormity of that split second. The turmoil and heartache that I have caused Mr. Lombardi's family, as well as my own, is something I deeply regret. At the time, I did not comprehend the impact that selfish choice would have on so many people. I thought that I was an adult because society says you are at the age of 21, but I was far from an adult. More than anything I regret taking Mr. Lombardi's life. Not one person deserves to be the victim of a violent crime. Accepting responsibility for my actions has been part of my growth the last three decades. I'd like nothing more than to atone for my actions without diminishing the loss of Mr. Lombardi's life.

Understanding I deserve nothing in the form of freedom, I still believe I am worthy of a second chance to be a productive member of society. I am in no way the same person I was in 1988. I've matured in to the man I should have been then. I have not just existed in this environment for 31 years doing nothing to be a better person. I have educated myself in different areas of technology - aspiring not be left behind the times. The desire to not be a product of this environment, which for most is to become a better criminal, fueled me to choose a different path, exploring my full potential in everything I do; even though I feel as if I am stuck in a time capsule.

There are a significant number of men in this environment that are also worthy of a second chance to be a productive citizen. They realize the error of their ways and walk a different path in prison, which is ironic if you think about it. They are able to live within the rules and regulations of the prison society without much effort. They made a mistake that sent them to prison and when they come to recognize that – they shape up. It really is that simple. Not every person in prison is criminal minded. There are those that lost themselves in the moment. A significant reason for the temporary lapse in judgement has to do with the age of the person when the crime was committed. This is something that society is starting to recognize. How do we help them? We help by seeing them as an individual and not just as a DOC number. As humans we are not infallible; we all need some sort of help at some point. Even though I received a life sentence, I have not given up hope. The sentence has not hollowed me as it has others. I believe SB 20-076 could be the hope some of us need.

One of the biggest things that has impacted my life is that I learned the very ultra-fine art of dog training. From 2006 through 20107 I trained 36 dogs in three separate facilities; Kit Carson,

Bent County and Sterling. Kit Carson and Bent County were Service dog programs, while Sterling was the DOC program. I was actually the individual responsible for getting Canine Companions for Independence to consider and finally place their dogs in Bent County after the Kit Carson Correctional Facility closed. At Bent County, I was instrumental in getting that program off the ground, teaching the first 20 men the required canine science class, as well as how to train service dogs. New programs are never easy to get started, but they are important for the growth of the prison population. I conveyed to those men that it takes love and compassion to train an 8-week old puppy into a potential service dog. I shared with them the story of the positive energy I put in to each dog and how dog by dog I was sending myself out into the world. The individuals that have a dog I trained speak very highly of their canine companions and the way it responds. I learned a craft and an art. I have one more tool under my belt that will assist me the day I am released. Dog training is where I will hang my hat and live what life I have left.

I was also given the chance to speak to "at risk" youth while at Kit Carson in a program called "Last Chance Reality Check" (L.C.R.C.). I found it very rewarding to share my story with those that came to tour the facility. The hardest part of that was coming out of my shell to give my testimony. At that time, I had been incarcerated 20 years. I had no idea how to talk to a teenage kid. When it came down to it, being honest was the way to make the story flow. Again, I sent some positive energy out with each person on that tour. Most of the adolescents said they would never forget me and the adults thanked me for my candor. Powerful moments! I have been able to translate those conversations into new ones with some of the young offenders I have met since leaving Kit Carson in 2008. Making a difference in their lives was the goal. I received a letter a year ago from a young man I was in Sterling with and he told me that it was because of me he would never return to this life. I have many friends that have left prison. One in particular has told me he wouldn't be where he is today without my encouragement. Out of prison for 11 years and off parole, he owns and operates two gyms. He has traveled the world competing in powerlifting competitions. His life has given him the stability to be successful.

For many years I sunk myself in to my job and then was advised to take some classes. I completed 7- Habits on the inside, as well as the LCF Pre-Release class. I was the Para-Pro in the Pre-Release class for a short time as well, and participate in other cognitive classes such as Sharpen the Saw and the iLIVE program. These are accomplishments in which I take great pride.

In closing, I would like to share that I truly empathize with the Lombardi family for all that I took from them. I look at the world and think of all the life I have missed these past 30 plus years, and know it doesn't compare to the life Mr. Lombardi missed because of me. I don't have any idea how many years in prison make up for the pain I caused everyone connected to this. I do believe that I have paid society a great debt. I made a huge mistake; that mistake does not make me irredeemable. I have changed, grown and try to make a positive impact on those I encounter. That means a lot to me. I would hope that it means something to others. SB 20-076 could be just the chance some of us need to redeem ourselves. Thank you so much for taking the time to hear my story. I am appreciative of your attention.