

Virus parole grants spark criticism from prosecutors, families

Virginia is said to free violent offenders without notification

By The Associated Press

During a push to accelerate the review of parole-eligible inmates because of the coronavirus pandemic, Virginia released dozens of violent offenders, including killers, rapists and kidnappers, blindsiding prosecutors and victims' families who say they were not properly notified as required by law, a review by The Associated Press has found.

"I mean, good grief. What, they were never going to tell us and here we are thinking this killer is still in jail?" said Juanita Gillis, who was informed by an AP reporter that the man who fatally shot her brother in 1993 was paroled by the board in March.

Thomas Runyon's killer, Dwayne Markee Reid, was among at least 35 people convicted in killings who were granted parole in March, according to an Associated Press review of parole board records, court records and interviews with prosecutors. Ninety-five inmates were paroled in March, the most recent month for which decisions are public, just over half the number approved in all of 2019.

Many of those released had served decades in prison.

"The Parole Board, already inclined to grant parole prior to the pandemic, felt that expediting certain cases was appropriate due to age of the offender, underlying health conditions, and the Board was confident that the release was compatible with public safety," board chair Tonya Chapman, who took over that role in April, wrote in an email.

She said that in normal circumstances there's usually time for prosecutor notification, "however, these are unprecedented times."

Brian Moran, Virginia's secretary of public safety and homeland security, said Gov. Ralph Northam's administration has full confidence in the board and its ability to decide which offenders have been reformed.

Moran has repeatedly emphasized that only a small number of the approximately 30,000 inmates held in state prisons — about 2,300 — are eligible for parole and that under Virginia's parole system, the majority of those have been locked up for a long time after committing violent crimes.

Virginia lawmakers abolished discretionary parole in 1995, so most inmates who are eligible either committed their crimes before then or are older than 60 and meet certain conditions making them eligible for geriatric release.

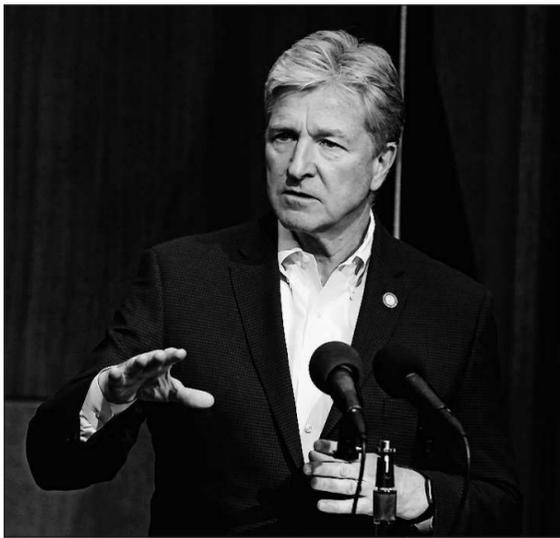
"These are tough cases," Moran said.

Some prosecutors are outraged about releases in their jurisdictions and have criticized the board for what they say is a lack of transparency and communication. The board is largely exempt from Virginia's public records law and does not explain its reasoning for granting releases.

"These are the most violent criminals you can get," said Phil Ferguson, the longtime commonwealth's attorney in Suffolk, where Reid was charged.

Reid was 16 when he shot Runyon during an attempted drug buy, according to Runyon's sister and news accounts of his trial, where a prosecutor called the shooting "a killing for fun." He had already served time in a juvenile correctional facility in connection with a previous killing, according to Ferguson. Attempts to reach him and the attorney who represented him at trial were not successful.

Chapman said the board attempted to notify the Runyon family using a national,



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online victim notification system called VINE.

"Unfortunately, there was only one anonymous phone number registered in VINE and it was no longer in service," she wrote in an email.

The board has one part-time employee assigned as the victim services coordinator, and Chapman said that since she took the role of chair April 16, she has used an investigator to help with locating potential victims.

In Halifax County, along the North Carolina line, Commonwealth's Attorney Tracy Quackenbush Martin has objected to the geriatric release of Debra Scribner, a 66-year-old convicted in 2011 of first-degree murder, conspiracy and a firearms charge in the death of her son-in-law, Eric Wynn.

Martin said she was not notified of Scribner's impending release as required by state law and questioned why the board would release someone convicted of such a serious crime who has spent less than 10 years in prison.

"Will people start to think, no matter what a jury says, that they can kill their enemies and be out in five so long as they wait until they are 60?" Martin wrote in an email.

Kevin Wynn, Eric Wynn's brother, said he also was not notified of the board's decision.

"I think we were passed

over like we were nothing," he said.

After he learned of Scribner's release, Wynn found out that the board had sent him a letter — with the wrong address. Wynn said he's lived in the same home for more than 20 years, well before Scribner's arrest.

State code says the parole board must "endeavor diligently" to contact the victim before making any decision to release an inmate on discretionary parole, and the definition of a victim in a homicide includes relatives.

Criminal justice reform advocates have long said the state is too stingy with parole.

Shannon Ellis, an attorney with the Legal Aid Justice Center, said it isn't fair to criticize the release of a prisoner only because of their offense.

"I think you have to ask a lot more questions ... including how long that person had served, whether that person under any credible assessment would be considered a danger to the public, to what degree does keeping a person incarcerated during a crisis like this could be giving them a death sentence?" Ellis said.

But Gillis, Runyon's sister, said she doesn't think the now-43-year-old Reid deserves the freedom he's been granted.

"He killed a human being. Doesn't that mean anything anymore?" she said.

In N.Va., Arlington County says it's not yet ready to reopen

Board developing time frame that's longer than rest of state

By The Associated Press

ARLINGTON — At least one Northern Virginia county says it is not yet ready to move ahead with plans to reopen the economy in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Arlington County Board issued a statement Friday night saying it is working with the governor's office and other Northern Virginia jurisdictions to develop a separate, extended time frame for reopening from the rest of the state.

On Friday, Gov. Ralph Northam announced plans for an extremely limited first phase of reopening businesses with a tentative start date of May 15. But he said Northern Virginia may be able to opt out if it doesn't feel ready.

The Arlington board said Friday night that hospitalizations continue to rise in Northern Virginia, and that the region accounts for a disproportionate share of COVID-19 cases. As a result, the board said that "for our region as well as Arlington, specifically, the most responsible path forward is maintaining our current operating status" until data shows the virus is more clearly on decline.

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Day Pick 4: 4-7-4-9

Day Cash 5: 2-7-12-14-16
SATURDAY, MAY 9
Night Pick 3: 6-4-6

Night Pick 4: 6-2-7-2
Night Cash 5: 3-4-12-17-24
Cash 4 Life: 23-38-42-54-60 (CB 1)

Bank a Million: 1-7-12-14-22-24 (BB 39)
Power: 12-18-42-48-65 (PB 19) 5x
 There was no jackpot-

winning ticket in Saturday's \$68 million multistate Powerball drawing. Wednesday's estimated jackpot is \$77 million.

CORRECTIONS

We want to correct substantive errors. Call the appropriate News department.

Corrections appear on this page.

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