

Senator Pam Helming

Representing the 54th New York Senate District



Democrat & Chronicle

Don't water down life without parole in NY



Your Turn
Pamela Helming
Guest columnist

After listening to Sam Nordquist's mother speak about her son, and after personally meeting with parents of other children who were brutally murdered, I am left with one unshakable conviction: When a judge sentences someone to life without parole, those words must mean exactly that.

No exceptions.

No second chances.

And yet, Albany is moving in precisely the opposite direction.

Sam Nordquist was 24 years old

when he was killed. Prosecutors say he endured weeks of torture. His body was found in a field.

In Ontario County Court, Precious Arzuaga recently pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and related charges in connection with Nordquist's torture and killing. She is expected to be sentenced to "life without the possibility of parole" in early September.

For a crime this monstrous, nothing less is imaginable.

But legislation already introduced in Albany raises serious concerns about whether that sentence would remain permanent.

The Elder Parole bill, supported by 32 state Senate Democrats, would mandate parole hearings for any convicted criminal who has served at least 15 years

and reached age 55. Its sweeping "notwithstanding" language carves out no exceptions, leaving open the chilling possibility that even the most depraved convicted criminals could one day walk free.

A second bill, the Second Look Act, goes further still. It would allow any convicted criminal to petition a judge for a reduced sentence after serving just 10 years, regardless of what they did or whose lives they destroyed.

Making matters worse, New York's own chief judge has repeatedly championed the Second Look Act, going so far as to call our current sentencing system "stupid" at a public forum.

When a judge sentences someone to "life without parole," should that sentence ever be revisited?

I believe the answer is an unequivocal no.

Victims' families have already endured more than anyone should ever have to bear. When they leave a courtroom after sentencing, they walk out carrying one thing they didn't have before: certainty. The certainty that justice will hold and that the monster who shattered their lives will never have the opportunity to shatter another.

The family must not be robbed of that. "Life without parole" must mean life without parole.

Pamela Helming is the New York state senator for the 54th District, representing Ontario, Wayne, and Livingston counties and the Monroe County towns of Chili, Mendon, Riga, Rush, and Wheatland.

After listening to Sam Nordquist's mother speak about her son, and after personally meeting with parents of other children who were brutally murdered, I am left with one unshakeable conviction: when a judge sentences someone to life without parole, those words must mean exactly that. No exceptions. No second chances.

And yet, Albany is moving in precisely the opposite direction.

Sam Nordquist was 24 years old when he was brutally murdered. Prosecutors say he endured weeks of torture. His body was found in a field.

In Ontario County Court, Precious Arzuaga recently pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and related charges for Sam's torture and killing. She is expected to be sentenced to "life without the possibility of parole" in early September. For a crime this monstrous, nothing less is imaginable.

But legislation already introduced in Albany raises serious concerns about whether that sentence would remain permanent.

The Elder Parole bill, supported by 32 Senate Democrats, would mandate parole hearings for any convicted criminal who has served at least 15 years and reached age 55. Its sweeping "notwithstanding" language carves out no exceptions, leaving open the

chilling possibility that even the most depraved convicted criminals could one day walk free.

A second bill, the Second Look Act, goes further still. It would allow any convicted criminal to petition a judge for a reduced sentence after serving just 10 years, regardless of what they did or whose lives they destroyed.

Making matters worse, New York's own Chief Judge has repeatedly championed the Second Look Act, going so far as to call our current sentencing system "stupid" at a public forum.

When a judge sentences someone to "life without parole," should that sentence ever be revisited?

I believe the answer is an unequivocal no.

Victims' families have already endured more than anyone should ever have to bear. When they leave a courtroom after sentencing, they walk out carrying one thing they didn't have before: certainty. The certainty that justice will hold. That the monster who shattered their lives will never have the opportunity to shatter another.

The family must not be robbed of that. "Life without parole" must mean life without parole.