



April 6th, 2026

To: Supervised Release Board Members

Commissioner Paul Schnell

Chris Bray, PhD, MA, LP

Jo C Earhart

Andrew Larson

Jody Nelson, Ed. D, LMFT

Sheryl Ramstad

Donald Strefert

CC: Aubrey Steckelberg, staff - aubrey.steckelberg@state.mn.us

From: Justin Terrell, Executive Director, Minnesota Justice Research Center

Subject: Recommendations for Minnesota's Supervised Release Board

Who we are

The Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to driving meaningful change to Minnesota's criminal legal system through rigorous, community-centered research, education, and policy development. We seek a criminal legal system that promotes public safety by being more equitable, accountable, and restorative in delivering justice. Our organization is made up of individuals with a diverse range of expertise and experience with the criminal legal system, including scholars, practitioners, students, survivors, and formerly incarcerated people

Overview of Recommendations

The Minnesota Supervised Release Board, created in July 2024 to bring transparency and shared decision-making to parole, is legislatively required to consider 12 distinct factors when evaluating release for individuals serving life or indeterminate sentences. We welcomed this legislative change and do believe that progress has been made in making the process more transparent and fair. However, an analysis of a 2025 case example and a review of five months' worth of votes revealed learnings that led us to share three recommendations we outline in more detail below.

We recommend

- 1) The board adopts a structured framework to ensure all 12 statutory factors are meaningfully considered;
- 2) the board adds more asset-based evaluation alongside deficit-based review, and
- 3) the Department of Corrections (DOC) expands board membership to include greater diversity of identity and lived experience.



Background on the Minnesota Supervised Release Board

The Supervised Release Board is the body given authority to grant parole/release for individuals with indeterminate or life sentences (including individuals assigned long-term sentences as juveniles). Before the board was created in July of 2024, parole decisions were exclusively held by the Minnesota Commissioner of Corrections. The new board was meant to relieve the Commissioner of Corrections of sole responsibility for decisions regarding release, offer a degree of transparency to the process for community members, and to reduce the potential for politicization of decisions. The board enacts parole decisions through a majority vote.

The present Supervised Release Board is composed of five members alongside the Commissioner of Corrections, who acts as Chair. For parole reviews of individuals sentenced as juveniles, an additional two members join. All members are appointed by Minnesota's Governor.

The Minnesota state legislature, in statute 244.05 subd. 5(i) states, "when considering whether to grant supervised release or parole to an inmate serving a life sentence or indeterminate sentence, the board shall consider, at a minimum,

- (1) the report prepared pursuant to paragraph (e) (*a "community investigation report"*);
- (2) the report prepared pursuant to paragraph (f), if applicable (which refers to a "development report" for those under 18 at the time of offense);
- (3) a victim statement under paragraph (g), if submitted;
- (4) the statement of a prosecutor under paragraph (h), if submitted;
- (5) the risk the inmate poses to the community if released;
- (6) the inmate's progress in treatment, if applicable;
- (7) the inmate's behavior while incarcerated;
- (8) psychological or other diagnostic evaluations of the inmate;
- (9) information on the inmate's rehabilitation while incarcerated;
- (10) the inmate's criminal history;
- (11) if the inmate was under 18 years of age at the time of the commission of the offense, relevant science on the neurological development of juveniles and information on the inmate's maturity and development while incarcerated; and
- (12) any other relevant conduct of the inmate while incarcerated or before incarceration."

Thus, we would expect the board to include a discussion in their hearing of each of these factors. **How** the board weighs community perspectives, victim statements, prosecutor statements, risk to the community, treatment progress, behavior while incarcerated, psychological/diagnostic evaluations, rehabilitation, and criminal history is critical and something we recommend the board evaluate.



Learnings From A Case Example

We examined one case example from 2025 to explore whether or not, and how, this board makes parole decisions based on all of these factors. What we observed was a significant and almost singular emphasis on psychological/diagnostic evaluations related to “criminal thinking” and a dearth of conversation and opportunity to explore the various other factors.

In addition, we reviewed meeting notes and votes from November 2025 to February 2026. During this time period, 25 cases were reviewed, and 28% had parole approved.

More specifically, we saw the following shortfalls in the case example that merit an evaluation. We recognize our limited sample pool, but we still want to encourage the board to reflect on what we saw.

1. **Significant emphasis on psychological or other diagnostic evaluations.** An essential element of treatment models within carceral spaces is the emphasis on a type of cognitive thinking termed “criminal thinking.” These models suggest there is a pathology that assessors can use to determine if a person still presents a threat to the community. Determinations about criminal thinking are often made at the time of commitment to the Department of Corrections and at points throughout their incarceration. In the case example we observed, there was an almost singular focus on psychological assessments and evaluations. Research shows there is a persistent gap between how parole decisions are made in practice and what the empirical evidence actually supports. According to Ruhland et al. (2016), the factors most commonly used by decision-makers (things like input from prosecutors and an individual’s demeanor at the hearing) have not been validated as reliable predictors of successful community reintegration. Scholars also point out that the assessments may be biased in high-stakes decisions like parole – one study of California lifers found that reliance on assessment accounts for a significant portion of the observed racial disparity (Young & Pearlman, 2021). The role of psychological assessments is important, but the board should consider whether they place too strong an emphasis on one of several factors they are legislatively directed to consider. Again, in the case example we reviewed, there was no discussion at all of the individual’s behavior while incarcerated, victim statements, the risk to the community, or rehabilitation progress.
2. **Focus on past deficits over positive changes.** During a parole hearing, incarcerated individuals are frequently asked about their mental state and intentions at the time of their offense. In order to examine change and readiness for reintegration into society, the board must review the past deficits that led to the offense. However, in the case example we analyzed, the board tended to focus solely on the past offense instead of using it as a launching point to



examine change over time. Historically, research shows that deficit-based tools for parole decisions have value (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), but growing evidence demonstrates the need for asset-based assessments (see, for example, Mourão et al., 2025). The legislative factors reflect this incorporation of some asset-based factors, as the “community investigation report” is intended to “reflect the sentiment of the various elements of the community toward the inmate, both at the time of the offense and at present.” In the case example we reviewed, this did not seem to be considered at all.

- 3. Lack of diversity in board composition.** The present Supervised Release Board lacks racial, professional, and experiential diversity. Diversity of identity and experiences increases the likelihood that some members of the board may better connect with and understand the lived experiences of the incarcerated individual. Currently, the board lacks racial diversity, and every member formerly (or currently, in the case of the commissioner) worked in corrections. While a background in corrections for some board members is critical for topical knowledge, a board made up entirely of corrections officials lacks the necessary diversity for a complex understanding of possible success factors in reentry. There is also no one serving on the board who has lived a carceral experience, which may again expand the understanding of what successful reentry can look like. This represents a gap in key wisdom about all the factors that board members are supposed to consider.

MNJRC Policy Recommendations

- 1. Balance the weight given to psychological/diagnostic evaluations.** The board should ensure all 12 legislatively required factors receive meaningful consideration during hearings. To prevent any single factor from dominating, the board could adopt a formal checklist or framework that guarantees each of the 12 factors is explicitly discussed and documented in every parole review. This includes giving substantive attention to victim statements where they exist, community reports, behavior while incarcerated, and rehabilitation progress. Additionally, the board (or another entity within the DOC) should consider evaluating the diagnostic tools themselves for potential bias, as research suggests that while associated with recidivism, criminal thinking assessments may produce biased outcomes if used as the primary basis for high-stakes decisions like parole. Periodic review of which assessments are being used, how they are administered, and how much weight they carry in final decisions would help ensure greater fairness and accuracy in the evaluation process. Finally, in the case example we reviewed, the individual did not appear to be familiar with the same diagnostic reports as the board. Considerable effort should be made to ensure the individual has access to any necessary information/report about which they will be asked.



2. **Shift toward asset-based evaluation alongside deficit-based review.** While examining the circumstances of the original offense is necessary, the board should use the past as a launching point for assessing growth and change over time. This may include incorporating the community investigation report's present-day community sentiment into the conversation, not just historical context. Furthermore, the board should consider the value of encouraging the incarcerated person to have counsel and/or community support to speak on their behalf to further understand the possible assets the person may need to rely on when reentering their community.

3. **Increase diversity in board composition.** The board should expand beyond its current membership to include members with racial diversity, varied professional backgrounds (e.g., social work, mental health, community reentry), and ideally individuals with lived carceral experience. This would broaden the understanding of reentry success factors. In reviewing voting decisions, the majority of the time, there was unanimous voting, which can demonstrate a lack of ideological difference.

We appreciate your consideration of the following recommendations and would be happy to discuss any of the ideas moving forward.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Justin Terrell".

Justin Terrell
Executive Director
Minnesota Justice Research Center
justin@mnjrc.org



Works Cited

Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2010). *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (5th ed.).

Mourão, A., Sousa, M., Ferreira, M., Gonçalves, L., Caridade, S., & Cunha, O. (2025). Beyond recidivism: A systematic review exploring comprehensive criteria for successful reintegration after prison release. *Crime & Delinquency*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548251335322>

Ruhland E. L., Rhine E. E., Robey J. P., Mitchell K. L. (2016). The continuing leverage of releasing authorities: Findings from a national study. Robina Institute of Criminal Law and Criminal Justice.

<https://robinainstitute.umn.edu/publications/continuing-leverage-releasing-authorities-findings-national-survey>

Walters, G. D. (2023). Risk, needs, and behavior: Moderating the mediated relationship between criminal thinking, institutional infractions, and recidivism with time spent in prison. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00938548221131948>

Young, K. M., & Pearlman, J. (2021). Racial disparities in lifer parole outcomes: The hidden role of professional evaluations. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 46, 625–662.