

Issues in End-of-Life Care in Prisons: A Year-End Retrospective

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AS 2025 DREW TO A CLOSE, two issues stood out in a review of the professional literature and the media attention given to end-of-life care in prisons – the aging prison population and compassionate release. The latter, in particular, has seen extensive news coverage in both the broadcast and print news media in the last year, notably in the U.S., as the many postings on the End-of-Life Care Behind Bars website will attest.

Clearly needed is a review of current policies and practices regarding compassionate release or medical parole, which to date have been limited in application and effect, some would have it to the extreme. Few applications are successful. Issues of security and public safety have overridden basic human rights. Not in dispute, however, is the almost universal recognition of the challenges facing correctional services and that of one of society's most vulnerable and marginalized populations as they age, living with a terminal illness or complex medical needs, and facing the prospect of spending their last days incarcerated.



If basic human rights is too controversial an issue for policy makers to tackle, what of the economics of housing and caring for an aging prison population in a system strapped for resources?

Drawing on studies from Europe, North America, and Australia, there are converging challenges: overcrowded prisons unequipped for geriatric or palliative care, governance failures in correctional health, and restrictive compassionate-release practices that keep terminally ill inmates behind bars. International research points to the same needs – staff training, human-rights-based care, and partnerships between prisons, health systems, and community hospices.

End-of-life care for the incarcerated cannot be left to correctional convenience; it demands coordinated reform linking justice, medicine, and dignity.

Image credit: 'The case for compassionate release,' *Gargoyle*, Alumni Magazine for the University of Wisconsin Law School, September 2020: <https://bit.ly/4eD2aPR> (Artist not identified)

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