

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

Barry R. Ashpole

**A**S 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)

## Bibliography

### Aging Prison Population

Ashpole, BR. 'Caring for aging prisoners is not merely a matter of logistics, but a reflection of societal values,' *Correctional Health Care Report*, 2025;26(4): 73-78: <https://bit.ly/47yl3k1>

Auger, Y., Bouchara, A., Chassagne, A., *et al.* 'Aging well behind bars: An impossible challenge?' *Gérontologie et Société*, 2025;1(47): 149-158: <https://bit.ly/4mMiAKP>

Musselman, L. 'Aging in custody – Rethinking dignity and care in places of confinement,' *Agency & Dignity*, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (December 2025): <https://bit.ly/48uSJK3>

Novisky, M., Prost, SG., Fleury-Steiner, B., *et al.* 'Linkages between incarceration and health for older adults,' *Health & Justice* (April 2025): <https://bit.ly/3EtWOf>

Prison Reform Trust. 'Older people in prison' (February 2025): <https://bit.ly/3D73gGi>

### Compassionate Release

Botha, R., Sease, K. 'Lessons from abroad to strengthen South Africa's medical-parole system,' *Obiter* (Nelson Mandela University Law Journal), 2025;46(3):605-627: <https://bit.ly/47sejW0>

Lomastro, JA. 'Why expanding compassionate release is a moral and fiscal imperative,' *Nonprofit Quarterly* (October 2025): <https://bit.ly/48jBNH>

Muhammad, D. 'Weighing parole for aging prisoners is morally right, fiscally prudent,' *Release Aging People in Prison* (May 2025): <https://bit.ly/44XOUTO>

Muscherro, N., Spencer, M. 'Compassionate release reform – moving medical parole to medical professionals,' *JAMA Internal Medicine* (September 2025): <https://bit.ly/3JGEbVP>

Muscherro, N., Westgard, L., Wurcel, A. 'The unfulfilled promise of compassionate release,' *Health Affairs Forefront* (November 2025): <https://bit.ly/3JQeXEU>

---

BARRY R. ASHPOLE is an educator and communications consultant living in Ontario, Canada. Now semi-retired, he has been involved in palliative and end-of-life care since 1985. He established the End-of-Life Care Behind Bars website (<https://bit.ly/4dU4qmi>), an advocacy, teaching and research "tool" to inform and, hopefully, affect a seismic shift in society's attitudes towards the health and well-being of the incarcerated. Regular postings include annotated listings of current articles, reports, and so on, culled from the professional literature, the news media and other sources.

Republish This Article



The author believes in the free flow of information. Republish this article for free, online or in print, under Creative Commons licence, with due credit to the author and source. <https://bit.ly/3B9EK6n>