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**\*\*\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\*\*\***

***Senator Cordell Cleare and Assembly Member Eddie Gibbs Join Advocates to Demand Full Restoration of Jury Service Rights for People with Felonies — No Carve-Outs That Undermine Democracy***

***Critical Legislation Would Rightfully Restore Jury Service for New Yorkers with Felony Convictions Who Have Paid Their Debt to Society***

(ALBANY, NY) – Today, Senator Cordell Cleare and Assembly Member Eddie Gibbs stood with members of the legislature and advocates to [demand the New York State Legislature pass](#) the [Jury of Our Peers Act](#), which would end the lifetime ban on jury service eligibility for people with felony convictions. While the majority of U.S. states restore jury eligibility to people with felony convictions, New York lags behind.

Jury service eligibility is a core civic right that belongs to all New Yorkers. Our current law reinforces a system of two-tiered citizenship, a vestige of the Black Codes still present in New York State. Today's attendees made clear that they will reject any proposal that perpetuates this two-tiered justice system and emphasized the need to be bold to truly end perpetual punishment and inequitable treatment in our state.

In a moment when the very foundation of this country's democracy is in crisis, the bill's sponsors urged their colleagues to see this legislation as a restoration of the civic rights and duties essential to a functioning democracy. Amid current threats to the nation's core democratic system of checks and balances, the sponsors called on leadership to pass the bill without amendments, ensuring that the twinned rights of voting and jury service are restored concurrently in New York State.

This is supported by evidence demonstrating that jury diversity leads to better deliberations and fewer overturned verdicts. The legislation—which will strengthen our democracy and boost public confidence in the legal system—is supported by organizations focused on democracy reform, civil rights, racial justice, criminal legal system reform, reentry, and law enforcement.

**State Senator Cordell Cleare, Prime Sponsor of the Jury of Our Peers Act**, stated, “S.2240-A has the blessing of OCA and was drafted in direct response to the Governor's Veto Message of 2024. This language, and this language only, can be administered. Furthermore, the current version of the bill is the only version that is fair, equitable and consistent with the restoration of other rights, such as the franchise. Watering down the language only drowns justice, and I will not do it.”

**Assemblymember Eddie Gibbs, Assembly Prime Sponsor of the Jury of Our Peers Act**, said, “The Jury of Our Peers Act is personal for me as the first formerly incarcerated state legislator in New York. We have worked with stakeholders and the court system to produce a version of the bill that we are proud to stand behind and are confident can be fully implemented if signed into law. It will help reengage our formerly incarcerated individuals in society, it will help make our juries more representative of their community, and it will help safeguard against wrongful convictions. It's time for New York to join the majority of states, red states and blue states alike, that repealed their lifetime bans on jury service and pass the Jury of Our Peers Act.”

“Jury service is one of the cornerstones of our democracy, sharing an esteemed perch with the right to vote,” said **Assemblywoman Latrice Walker**. “In 2021, New York lawmakers restored the right to vote to people with felony convictions, but the same group of people cannot serve on a jury. The lifetime ban helps to create the underrepresentation of Black and brown people on juries, undermining the democratic premise of “jury of our peers.” Ending the lifetime ban will not only help diversify the jury pool, but it will also remove another barrier to full reintegration into society for New Yorkers returning home from prison. I am proud to call for the passage of the Jury of Our Peers Act. We need to continue our efforts to end all vestiges of a two-tiered system of justice.”

“The Jury of Our Peers Act is about restoring basic civil rights and affirming the humanity of those who’ve served their time. A felony conviction should not mean a lifetime ban from civic participation,” said **Assemblymember Demond Meeks**. “This legislation would increase diversity in jury pools, leading to fairer trials. New Yorkers who’ve paid their debt to society deserve a voice in our justice system—and that includes the right to serve on a jury. This is a matter of racial justice, of economic justice, and of common sense.”

“When a jury sits in judgment of a defendant it is important for them to understand the lived experience of that defendant. For those who have paid their debt to society, they should have restored their civic obligations and responsibilities including serving on juries and voting rights,” said **Assemblymember Deborah J. Glick**

“Jury service eligibility is a core civic right that belongs to all New Yorkers, yet our state unfairly denies this right to people with felony convictions. Our current law is unjust, has shameful racial roots, and creates a two-tiered system where some New Yorkers are deemed more worthy of civic participation than others. If New York is a true leader of democracy and civil rights, it’s time to remove this ban outright,” said **Senator Julia Salazar**.

“I am proud to cosponsor the Jury of Our Peers Act, which would end the lifetime ban on jury service for people with felony convictions,” said **Assemblymember Harvey Epstein**. “The current policy of excluding this population from jury service goes against the foundational ideal of a jury of your peers.”

“New York cannot claim to value justice while it denies people the right to serve on a jury based on a conviction, they have already served time for,” said **Assemblymember Emérita Torres**. “Jury service is a civic responsibility and should be available to every New Yorker who has returned home. This bill sets a clear, functional standard. It mirrors the restoration of voting rights and removes the confusion and carve-outs that have kept too many people excluded. Passing this bill is how we strengthen trust in the system and ensure our juries reflect all the voices of the people of this state.”

**Assemblymember Cunningham** said, “The Jury Of Our Peers Act is about restorative justice and ensuring that those who have served their time have all their civil rights restored once released. It is time that we change this outdated law and eliminate a clear injustice in our legal system. We can’t have juries of our peers if our peers are not allowed to serve. Those individuals who have completed their sentence should be afforded the right and dignity of being able to serve on a jury.”

**Daudi Justin**, attorney at Neighborhood Defender Services of Harlem and lead in Plaintiff in *Justin v. Tingling* said, “Let’s be unequivocally clear: there is no legitimate basis to exclude individuals with felony convictions from jury service. This isn’t a radical idea; it’s a matter of fundamental common sense. So much so, that even the state of Florida has recognized this truth and removed this discriminatory exclusion. Yet, here in New York, our continued exclusion of people like me, with felony convictions, from a fundamental democratic right, and the consequences are devastating for our fellow New Yorkers. I witness these harmful results firsthand, even at the earliest stages of a case. As an attorney, it is heartbreaking to tell innocent clients that, due to the profound lack of diversity in our jury selection, their unique story and perspective may not resonate with a jury that truly

understands. This systemic imbalance often compels them to accept a plea agreement, rather than pursuing their constitutional right to a trial where their innocence can be genuinely assessed by a jury of their actual peers.”

“Permanently excluding people with past felony convictions from full civic participation serves no legitimate purpose, it only perpetuates stigma,” said **Rob DeLeon, Deputy CEO of The Fortune Society**. “As someone directly impacted by the legal system, I know firsthand how these exclusions send a message that redemption has limits. They also deny people on trial from having true juries of their peers who are less likely to be influenced by implicit or explicit racial bias. Allowing people with past convictions to serve on juries would enhance faith in the legal system, promote public safety, and advance racial justice – three pillars of a healthier, more inclusive society. We urge the legislature to once again pass the Jury of Our Peers Act and urge Governor Hochul to sign it into law.”

“The lifetime ban on jury service for people with felony convictions is an unjust barrier that continues to undermine the very principles of democracy and equal citizenship,” said **Tina Luongo, Chief Attorney, Criminal Defense Practice, The Legal Aid Society**. “The Office of Court Administration has recognized that carve-outs, which require proof of completion for all sentencing requirements, are unadministrable and impractical. We cannot accept any amendments that dilute this bill’s intent or create a two-tiered justice system. True justice demands full restoration of jury service rights for all returning citizens who have paid their debt to society. We are grateful for the clear-eyed leadership of Senator Cleare and Assembly Member Gibbs and call on the New York State Legislature to act boldly and pass the Jury of Our Peers Act without carve-outs, affirming that every New Yorker’s voice and participation in our democracy matters equally.”

**Megan French-Marcelin, Senior Director of New York State Policy at the Legal Action Center**, said “In a moment where the nation’s democratic institutions and commitment to liberty and justice for all are under attack at every level of government, it is refreshing to witness our legislative sponsors stand strong on the principle that a conviction should not amount to a lifetime of perpetual punishment for any person. To ensure a future for New York where democracy is upheld, we must resist any impulse to carve individuals or categories of people out of the rights and responsibilities at the center of our nation’s Constitution. Jury of Our Peers would begin to remedy the still unfulfilled promise of these basic tenets.”

“The New York Senate and Assembly must vote on and pass the Jury of Our Peers Act without further delay,” said **David R. Jones, President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS)**. “Just as people are currently able to vote as soon as they are released from prison, they should also be eligible to serve on a jury. Excluding them creates less diverse juries and only exacerbates the disproportionate harm the legal system inflicts on people of color, giving them yet another reason to believe the justice system is anything but. The Jury of Our Peers Act restores faith in our courts and in the voir dire process that ensures, by evaluating each person as an individual, their fitness to serve.”

“New York permanently bars people with a past felony conviction from jury service eligibility — disproportionately denying thousands of Black and Brown New Yorkers a jury of their peers,” said **Naila Awan, Co-Director of Policy at the New York Civil Liberties Union**. “By passing the Jury of Our Peers Act, New York would restore the fundamental civil right of jury eligibility for everyone, no matter their criminal background or how much money they have in their pocket. All New Yorkers deserve the ability to fully participate in our state’s democratic process — it’s past time that the Jury of our Peers Act becomes law.”

“The Jury of Our Peers Act (S2240/A5414A) is a long-overdue step toward dismantling the legacy of racial exclusion embedded in our justice system. For too long, New York’s lifetime jury ban for people with felony convictions has served as a modern-day extension of the Black Codes - denying thousands, especially Black and brown New Yorkers, of their full rights as citizens,” said **Karen Wharton, Democracy Coalition Coordinator at Citizen Action of New York**. “By restoring jury eligibility upon release from prison and doing so in line with New York’s 2021 Voting Rights Restoration Act, this legislation affirms that every voice matters in our democracy. Diverse juries make for fairer trials, and breaking the cycle of exclusion is essential to ending the

trial-to-prison pipeline. The time is now for New York to end this two-tiered justice system and pass the Jury of Our Peers Act this session.”

“As someone who stood trial at just 15 years old and then spent seven years behind bars, I know how much hangs on who is, and who isn’t, allowed to sit in the jury box. Denying formerly incarcerated New Yorkers the right to serve after we leave prison turns the promise of a ‘jury of our peers’ into an empty slogan and keeps the scales of justice tilted. I stand with Senator Cleare and Assemblymember Gibbs in demanding a clean ‘Jury of Our Peers’ bill, no carve-outs, no delays because real justice means every community voice is heard,” said **Lukee Forbes, Executive Director of We Are Revolutionary.**

“Every New Yorker deserves the opportunity to fully participate in our democracy. Denying anyone who has served their time the ability to sit on a jury deprives them of their right to participate in the democratic process, and only erodes public trust in our judicial system. Albany lawmakers must recognize the importance of diverse, democratic juries and restore the right to jury service for all New Yorkers,” said **Susan Lerner, Executive Director of Common Cause New York.**

“Our state’s permanent bar on jury service for people with felony convictions denies thousands of New Yorkers one of the core tenets of civic engagement, eroding the democratic process and making the jury pool less diverse, less representative, and ultimately less equitable,” said **Jackie Godigian, Senior Supervising Policy Counsel of Brooklyn Defenders.** “We urge the legislature to pass the Jury of Our Peers Act this session to end this unjust ban and restore the right for a person to serve on a jury of their peers.”

“For too long, New York has upheld a system that welcomes returning community members’ labor and taxes but bars them from participating in one of the most fundamental pillars of democracy— the jury box. This bill begins to dismantle that hypocrisy. The lifetime ban on jury service is a relic of Jim-Crow era exclusion and a direct attack on civic equality, said **Brittany McCoy, Managing Director of Policy at The Bronx Defenders.** Every day we see how systemic barriers strip the people we represent of their dignity and silence them in the very system that judges them. Restoring jury eligibility upon release is a necessary step toward a more legitimate and participatory democracy. We’re proud to stand with our partners and legislative champions to end this discriminatory ban once and for all.”

“Our justice system is made stronger when it reflects the diversity of our communities. This legislation ensures that individuals who have completed their sentences, no matter their past offense, can access their civic right to serve on a jury,” said **Eric Burse, Staff Attorney from New York County Defender Services.** “To deny them this right is to uphold perpetual punishment and undermine the very principle of rehabilitation. It’s a vital step toward building a more inclusive and effective justice system.”

“A trial by jury is one of few tangible ways a citizen can have access to justice -both dispensing and receiving,” said **Porsha Sha’fon Venable, Deputy Director of The Juror Project.** “It is one of few ways that everyday people can act as a safeguard for the everyday person. It is a right that anyone subject to the laws of our society should be afforded—even if they have made mistakes in the past.”

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