

Miyares' Report Exposes Virginia Parole Board Malpractice

By **Eric Burk**

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A report from Attorney General Jason Miyares' Office says the Virginia Parole Board violated state law governing victim and prosecutor notifications and had a "culture of ignoring the Virginia Code, Parole Board policies, and administrative procedures," while accelerating the rate of releases in March 2020. Senate Minority Leader Thomas Norment, Jr. (R-James City) responded to the report by requesting Judge Adrienne Bennett, who was Parole Board chair, to resign.

"Under Chair Adrienne Bennett, the Virginia Parole Board endangered public safety and abused its power by releasing dozens of violent felons against Parole Board policies, and frequently in clear violation of a court order or Virginia law," Attorney General Miyares said in a press release announcing the report. "Judge Bennett's brazen abuse of her power put Virginians' safety at risk so that she could promote a criminal-first, victim-last agenda without regard for victims or their safety."

The report contrasts March 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns with the increase in parole board releases in March 2020.

"The full scope of the Parole Board's watershed March 2020 releases has not been previously reported, but our investigation discovered that they included four capital murderers, 31 first-degree murderers, 11 rapists, and 33 offenders convicted of robbery. The Parole Board followed this significant set of releases by paroling Vincent Martin to significant public outcry," the report states, laying the blame for the releases at Bennett's feet and not COVID-19.

A decision to parole Vincent Martin in spring 2020 launched a political controversy where Republicans argued that the Parole Board under Governor Ralph Northam's administration was acting with disregard for victims of crime despite relevant Virginia law. That year, a report from the Office of the State Inspector General (OSIG) alleged that the board "violated both state law and parole board policies earlier this year in granting parole to the murderer of a police officer."

In 2021, a state-funded investigation from outside law firm Nixon-Peabody found that there was probable bias in one of the OSIG investigators; Northam said that report repudiated "unsubstantiated allegations repeatedly made by some legislators."

At the same time, Miyares and Youngkin were running for office on a platform that included tough-on-crime policies. Youngkin eventually promised to fire the entire parole board, while Miyares criticized the Democratic administration's "criminal-first, victim-last mindset."

After both were inaugurated, Youngkin replaced the parole board members and ordered the year-long investigation that led to Miyares' report.

The Office of the Attorney General report also challenges the Nixon-Peabody report: "Nixon Peabody's concealment of important facts skewed its report by hiding information that was politically harmful to the Northam administration, and ultimately resulted in a \$250,000 whitewash using taxpayer money."

Recommendations in the report include creating a code of ethics for the Parole Board, allowing public access to parole hearings, increasing funding and staff for the board, and numerous actions to improve victim access and ability to provide input on parole board decisions.

An attorney for Bennett told *The Associated Press* that the report "grossly targeted" Bennett, who is now a judge.

"Judge Bennett is a dedicated public servant who has served with distinction on the bench, on the parole board, and as a respected attorney in the Virginia Beach legal community for decades. No attempt to vilify her changes that," a statement obtained by *The AP* said.

"This report was far worse than any of us could have possibly imagined," Norment said in a press release. "The reckless and deliberate disregard for the Code, and for the Parole Board's

own policies and procedures, ranks among the most outrageous conduct by government officials I have seen in my three decades of service.”

“The Attorney General’s report includes important legislative and policy recommendations,” Norment continued. “For those recommendations requiring legislative action, the General Assembly should act on a bipartisan basis as soon as possible. Additionally, we must demand accountability for these egregious actions and derelictions of duty. I am, therefore, respectfully asking Judge Bennett to avoid legislative action regarding her status by immediately submitting her resignation from the bench.”

Eric Burk is a reporter at The Virginia Star and The Star News Network. This article originally appeared in The Virginia Star. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of The Republican Standard. Republished with permission.