

# Former parole board chair violated policy in releasing parolees from supervision, records show

- [Mark Bowes](#), [Patrick Wilson](#) - Mar 26, 2021

**Adrienne Bennett**, the former state parole board chair, now serves as a judge.

Adrienne Bennett, then the chairwoman of the Virginia Parole Board, emailed an administrative assistant to say "I will release anyone you say to release!" It was unclear what criteria Bennett used in making her decisions, which the Office of the State Inspector General said in an unreleased report violate board policy because there was no recommendations from a parole officer.

Judge Adrienne Bennett, as chairwoman of the Virginia Parole Board, unilaterally released more than 100 parolees from Virginia Department of Corrections supervision in violation of long-standing rules, according to records obtained by the Richmond Times-Dispatch. The criteria she used to make her decisions are unclear.

Among those released was Anthony Anderson, who was sentenced in 1985 to two life terms plus 85 years for a series of crimes he committed in 1984 at age 16. He'd been convicted with other teens of killing a corrections officer inside the Richmond Jail during a failed escape, fatally shooting a Palestinian immigrant in an aborted robbery, raping a nurse in South Richmond and robbing two Chesterfield County businesses.

The Virginia Parole Board under Bennett's leadership granted Anderson parole in June 2018. Less than two years later, on April 6, 2020, Bennett discharged Anderson, now 52, from parole supervision. Parole board policy requires a recommendation from a parole officer before ending supervision, a step investigators found Bennett ignored in Anderson's case and others.

Anderson was one of 103 parolees — 69 of whom were serving life sentences or more — that Bennett discharged early "at her sole discretion" between April 5 and

April 15, 2020, her last day on the job, according to an unreleased report by the Office of the State Inspector General obtained by The Times-Dispatch. The report has not yet been submitted to the governor and is not in final form. It concludes that Bennett violated parole board policy.

“It’s certainly not appropriate to remove somebody from parole supervision early without discussing it with the parole officer,” said William Muse, who was appointed parole board chair in February 2011 by then-Gov. Bob McDonnell and served until July 2014. “I can tell you there was never a situation where we didn’t get the parole officer’s input.”

Virginia law does not specifically grant the parole board chair the power to release parolees from supervision. The law also states that parolees will be granted final discharges when the board determines it “will not be incompatible with the welfare of such person or of society.”

Another person released from supervision was Joseph Giarratano, one of the best-known and most controversial death row inmates in Virginia history, who was granted parole in November 2017 after serving 38 years for the 1979 rape and capital murder of a 15-year-old girl and the murder of her mother in Norfolk. Gov. Doug Wilder commuted Giarratano’s sentence to life in prison in 1991, two days before his scheduled execution.

Parolees who were serving life sentences or more when released on parole are required under parole board policy to complete the rest of their sentence on parole supervision, unless the parole board discharges them on a recommendation from their parole officer.

The average time spent on parole supervision for the 69 parolees with life sentences or more that Bennett discharged early was 2.3 years. For 31 other parolees with sentences of 50 years or more, the average time on supervision was 2.4 years, OSIG noted in its report.

The watchdog agency, in its report, confirmed that the probation and parole offices supervising the offenders would not have submitted a recommendation for their early release until they successfully completed at least five years of supervision.

**According to emails** obtained by The Times-Dispatch, Bennett told an administrative assistant at the parole board that she wanted to discharge from supervision as many parolees as she could in the days before her April 15 departure. The General Assembly had elected her as a judge in Virginia Beach. Bennett, through her attorney Jeffrey Breit, declined to comment for this story. Breit said they would wait until a new investigation is done.

Instead of contacting the parole officer responsible for monitoring the parolees to determine their compliance under supervision, Bennett sought recommendations by email from the administrative assistant about whom she could discharge early. The OSIG report refers to one of the email exchanges but does not suggest any wrongdoing by the assistant.

On April 7, 2020, Bennett and the assistant had this email exchange:

“Hi Adrienne, here are a few more names for early discharge. I checked each one, they are doing well. I know you are looking at these, and you may not agree with all of them! I have not finished the supervision list yet!”

“I will release anyone you say to release!” Bennett responded.

To that, the office assistant replied: “Ugh! I thought you were looking behind me. Pleze, I feel drunk with power.” That was followed by an emoji for an upside-down smiley face.

“Seriously, most of the names are from Board appointment cases!!!...Hopefully, with no parole obligations, they will continue to flourish and know true freedom. You are truly giving these folks a fresh start!!”

Bennett responded: “Waive that wand of power and let’s cut them loose. There needs to be a silver lining to all of this! Give me more!!!”

In the emails provided to the newspaper, Bennett asked three times for the names of parolees she should release from supervision, and the administrative assistant obliged.

“Just in case you want to look to see who is on supervision I am attaching a report of everyone who is still on supervision,” Bennett told the staff member in an April 6, 2020, email. “Thank you! From one bleeding [heart emoji] to another!”

The administrative assistant replied: “Thank you for including me in this process. You have always made me feel my opinions and or thoughts mattered! Also, I have some weird memory and a vast recollection of names!” That was followed by two heart emojis.

OSIG contacted each district probation and parole office that had parolees assigned to them at the time Bennett discharged them. “No parole officer nor anyone from the district offices requested or recommended that these 103 specific offenders be discharged from supervision,” says the agency’s unreleased report.

OSIG also confirmed that no parole officers submitted a discharge report for the parole board to review for any of the parolees, which is required by the Virginia Department of Corrections.

It remains unclear what criteria Bennett and the parole board administrative assistant were using in deciding which parolees would get released from their supervision.

In an email dated April 8, 2020, Bennett wrote — it was unclear to whom — that the administrative assistant who was helping Bennett “is our historian and she is going through a report of everyone currently on parole supervision. Some have been on supervision FOREVER — over ten years!”

“We have discharged over 100 deserving souls from parole supervision in the past week or so,” Bennett added. “The discharges are bringing a lot of joy to these guys and gals.”

On April 6, 2020, Bennett sent an email to a parolee who had been sentenced to 75 years and six months for his crimes: “Here is your early discharge certificate,” she wrote. Officials “will be in contact with you in the near future. I cannot email everybody their certificates or provide updates — it is not normal protocol and I am running out of time!”

The parolee, whom Bennett did not name in the email, had served about 22 years of his sentence and was paroled in 2019. He served just over a year on parole supervision, even though conditions issued by the parole board stated that his supervision expiration date was Dec. 27, 2046, OSIG said in its report.

In another case, a parole board employee reached out to a parole officer in a March 27, 2020, email to inform him about the early discharge of Emerson Stevens, who was under his supervision. The parole officer, who was caught off guard, replied:

“This is a HUGE surprise. He was due to be on parole for the next 80 years! He is all involved in the fairly high profile appeal of his original Murder conviction. That has to be playing into this. Is it not? I am not arguing however but this came in from way out in ‘left field.’ Is he being informed of this or do I need to close it up with him?”

Stevens was sentenced to 169 years in the 1985 abduction and strangulation murder of a mother of two in rural Lancaster County. The parole board released Stevens in 2017 after he served 30½ years of his sentence. Although his parole supervision date wasn’t set to expire until 2098, Bennett discharged him after two years and nine months.

The parole board employee then forwarded the parole officer’s email to Bennett, who wrote: “I would not provide an explanation in writing — but there is

substantial evidence of innocence and that was a factor in the decision to release him.”

Muse, the former parole board chair, said the parole board is not authorized by policy or state law to consider an offender’s guilt or innocence in decisions regarding parole or discharge from supervision.

“We’re not an appellate court,” he said. “We don’t decide whether the evidence is sufficient or not.”

Muse said that during his term, neither he nor the parole board unilaterally discharged parolees from supervision. The board, Muse said, generally didn’t grant early release from supervision; instead, parolees were typically monitored until they completed the period of supervision that was set when they were released on parole.

Jane Alford, a former probation and parole employee and certified rehabilitation counselor in the Richmond area who represents inmates seeking parole, said she viewed Bennett’s appointment as chair in 2017 as a positive move because her experience as a defense attorney would bring a new perspective. But Alford said she’s never heard of a parole board chair intervening in the supervision of parolees.

“To me, the chair would be more worried about getting people out of prison instead of worrying about how long they’re going to be on parole,” Alford said.

“So I don’t know what the goal was there. It’s so strange.”

After Alford was asked to review and comment on the OSIG report about the early supervision releases, she said it was bizarre that “nobody even knew what was going on” when OSIG investigators contacted probation and parole offices about parolees under their supervision who were being released without their knowledge or input.

“I don’t understand this at all,” Alford said of the decisions to release without consulting parole officers. “It was so out of character. The probation or parole officer wouldn’t have even been making a recommendation one way or the other until five years.”

The unreleased OSIG report and emails obtained by The Times-Dispatch are part of an ongoing investigation of the parole board by the Office of the State Inspector General, an investigation that began last year after the watchdog agency received complaints alleging the board violated policies and state law in processes used to grant parole for certain people who were eligible.

In at least nine reports, OSIG found violations of law or policy in its investigations, which were administrative and not criminal investigations.

After records were released to lawmakers and ended up in the news media, Inspector General Michael Westfall asked Virginia State Police to conduct a criminal investigation into how the records got out.

Jennifer Moschetti, the lead OSIG investigator who found wrongdoing, then filed a lawsuit outing herself as a whistleblower and asking a judge to grant her protection as a whistleblower under state law. Before the case was heard, however, [Westfall fired her.](#)

Her lawsuit also alleged that Gov. Ralph Northam’s staff, in a meeting, intimidated staff at OSIG over their investigation of the parole board; Northam’s office denies that.

The status of the OSIG investigation into Bennett’s discharge of the 103 parolees is unclear, and Westfall declined to be interviewed for this story.

Northam, who appoints the parole board, has resisted calls from Republican lawmakers that began last year for him to replace the members. Democratic

leaders, including House Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, have declined to answer questions about the issue, saying they want a new investigation.

Republicans have slammed the decision to fire the whistleblower while no one at the parole board has been held accountable.