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Greetings Colleagues of Diverse Professions

Enclosed you will find a clemency letter I recently sent to President Biden and Dr. Jill Biden on behalf of Leonard Peltier, a six time nobel peace prize nominee and internationally recognized prisoner who was recently denied parole and left to die in prison.

I am now writing to diverse professional organizations to formally report the systematic elder abuse of our incarcerated elder persons resulting from continued incarceration in spite of overwhelming evidence of the safety of their release. Sadly, prisoners are routinely ignored in professional advocacy because they do not vote and are not wealthy. And yet their resilient love in the face of the violent crucible of incarceration finds expression in art, poetry, literature, and supportive community. It is your responsibility as trauma-informed professional leadership to work together in a multidisciplinary coalition to repair the distrust in our directly impacted communities and heed the call to liberate the elders. The primary actors, the often frail elders who have endured the longest known prison sentences in all of humanity and some of whom have also suffered what internationally recognized torture of prolonged solitary confinement, now need a safe and supported return to their families and communities.

The last half century of my practice as a clinical psychologist has been marked by the massive failed experiment in mass incarceration while also ushering in a new framework of trauma-informed care influenced by two generations of women in diverse professions. The concepts of trauma informed care have recognized the social determinants of health extend beyond literacy and poverty to include police violence and structural racism. There is a greater understanding of intergenerational trauma, restorative justice, restitution, and even reparations which have all contributed to the larger narrative of the “abolition” of mass incarceration whose ties to slavery are best captured by the punishment clause of the 13th amendment.

Trauma-informed care is now the new standard as evidenced by federal agencies (<https://justiceinaging.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Reducing-Barriers-to-Reentry-for-Older-Adults-Leaving-Incarceration.pdf>) University Centers (<https://cthc.ucsf.edu/>), institutes that literally track trauma-informed policy and legislation. (<https://www.ctipp.org/post/2023-state-federal-trauma-informed-policy-review>

The American Psychological Association,
(<https://www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-trauma-recovery.pdf>)

The American Public Health Association position papers, (<https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2021/01/14/advancing-public-health-interventions-to-address-the-harms-of-the-carceral-system>)
Policy Papers, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/08/02/aging/>
Ethics Community, and
https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joe-2203_0.pdf
Conservative justice reform
[communityhttps://conservativejusticereform.org/public_safety_in_the_2024_election/](https://conservativejusticereform.org/public_safety_in_the_2024_election/)
have all weighed in on the crisis. The most compelling models of professional and institutional advocacy are when professionals are led by and guided by the primary actors- prisoners and former prisoners- as with the pre-eminent Abolitionist Law Center (<https://abolitionistlawcenter.org/>) and Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP <https://rappcampaign.com/>). Let us take their lead and honor our commitment to stop the elder abuse. We must engage law enforcement unions, corporations that profit from imprisonment, correctional officers unions, as well as politicians and the multidisciplinary interagency state plans that ignore our incarcerated elders (<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/aging/aging-our-way-pa.html>)

This formal report of elder abuse will be submitted to my personal archives and will be forwarded for archives of mass incarceration such as those at Brown University (<https://library.brown.edu/hay/collectionpolicy/voices-of-mass-incarceration/>) and posted on appropriate websites to catalogue the historical significance of this moment. We must now defend the integrity of our professional organizations or else become irrelevant to the indefensible suffering of our most vulnerable elders. The healing must start now. I look forward to your enthusiastic response to this report.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzanne Ross, Ph.D

CC:

Dr. Cynthia de las Fuentes

President, American Psychological Association

Nancy E. Lundebjerg

CEO, Geriatrics Society

Yvonne Chase, PhD, LCSW, ACSW

President, American Social Workers Association

Jennifer Mensik Kennedy

President, American Nurses Association

Becky Pringle

President, National Education Association

Nikitha Balaji

President Elect, American Medical Student Association (AMSA)

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Dear President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden,

I write to you as Suzanne Ross, a long-time advocate for Leonard Peltier and recently retired psychologist with over a half-century of practice. For decades, I have worked tirelessly alongside countless others to seek justice for Mr. Peltier, and today, I am reaching out with a renewed sense of urgency. I implore you to grant executive clemency to Leonard Peltier, a Native American activist whose unjust imprisonment for nearly half a century represents a profound failure of our justice system and an ongoing violation of human rights.

Mr. Peltier, now 79 years old and in failing health, has been incarcerated for 48 years for his alleged involvement in the deaths of two FBI agents during a 1975 confrontation on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. His conviction has been marred by well-documented irregularities, including coerced testimony, withheld exculpatory evidence, and judicial bias. These facts have been recognized by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, which have designated Mr. Peltier a political prisoner.

To those of us who have closely followed his case, Leonard's imprisonment is emblematic of a broader historical and systemic injustice. While we all understand the history of attempted genocide of the Native American peoples in our country, the United Nations defines cultural genocide, in part, as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group." Mr. Peltier suffered greatly as a child when he was forced to attend Wahpeton Indian Boarding School, where he was severely beaten for trying to sing his songs and practice his traditions. The targeting of Native American activists during the era of COINTELPRO and the deliberate denial of justice in his trial reflect a pattern of systemic oppression that cannot be ignored.

The July 2024 decision by the U.S. Parole Commission to deny Mr. Peltier parole—despite his advanced age, deteriorating health, and decades of exemplary conduct—is a continuation of this injustice. This decision perpetuates Leonard's suffering and underscores the cruelty embedded in the systems that govern his fate. It is, quite plainly, a perpetuation of psychological and physical torture.

Mr. President, you have spoken passionately about healing the wounds of division and injustice in our nation. Clemency for Leonard Peltier is an opportunity to act on these words. It is an opportunity to offer a measure of healing to Native communities who see in Leonard's plight a reflection of their own struggles against historical and ongoing oppression. It is also an

opportunity to demonstrate the transformative power of mercy and reaffirm our nation's commitment to justice.

Dr. Biden, your advocacy for education and understanding resonates deeply. I humbly ask that you lend your voice to this urgent plea for clemency. Together, you have the ability to make a decision that not only rights a historic wrong but also restores hope to all who believe in the possibility of justice and redemption.

Time is running out. Leonard Peltier's health is rapidly declining, and every day that passes is another day that justice is delayed. I beg you to act now, not only for Leonard but for the soul of our nation.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. Your decision could mark a pivotal moment in the journey toward healing and reconciliation for so many.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Ross, Ph.D

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