

# Homicides Prompt Special Session

Following a brutal crime, the Connecticut General Assembly looked at how to improve supervision of parolees in the community.

BY ALISON LAWRENCE

There are times when a single horrific crime can galvanize lawmakers into plunging ahead with significant changes to the criminal code. A robbery turned triple-homicide in Cheshire, Conn., last July was one of those times.

The deaths of Jennifer Hawke-Petit, 48, and her daughters Hayley, 17, and Michaela, 11, at the hands of two parolees led to a state task force inquiry, and by January, to a special session of the General Assembly to grapple with policy changes.

“The incident precipitated a discussion on the whole criminal justice system,” says Representative Michael Lawlor, co-chair of the Joint Judiciary Committee. Lawmakers have remained focused on making system-wide changes into the 2008 regular session.



REPRESENTATIVE  
MICHAEL LAWLOR  
CONNECTICUT

In the early morning hours of July 23, 2007, two men on parole broke into the home of Dr. William Petit Jr., a doctor in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Cheshire. His wife and two daughters were killed, one daughter was raped and the mother strangled. The doctor crawled out of the burning home after being brutally beaten.

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The two men arrested for the crime met at a halfway house after being released from prison in 2007. Both served time for robbery convictions, had no records of violence, and had been compliant with the terms of their release. The parole board, however, did not have sentencing transcripts in which the judge referred to one of the parolees as a “calculated, cold-blooded predator.”

Within days of the crime, Governor Jodi Rell commissioned the Sentencing and Parole Review Task Force to examine the arrest, charge, sentencing and release process for convicted offenders. The governor told the parole board to start treating all burglary offenders as if they were violent offenders. The judicial system and the Board of Pardons and Paroles agreed to improve the sharing of information between their departments.

There was an immediate desire to make speedy and simplistic changes that addressed the robbery-homicide case, says Representative Lawlor. Proposals included stiffening penalties under Connecticut’s three-strikes sentencing law. But work by the task force and research by legislative leaders determined that the General Assembly should take a broader look at policy changes.

In January, after the governor’s task force released policy recommendations, the General Assembly went into special session. The collection of laws passed were a compromise between the Democratic-controlled General Assembly and Republican Governor Rell. They address sentencing and supervision of violent offenders, the role and duties of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, the parole process and information sharing.

A new law makes burglarizing an occupied residence punishable by a minimum of 10 years in prison. The state’s part-time Board

of Pardons and Parole was replaced with a full-time, trained professional board. Second-degree burglary and the new crime of home invasion were classified as violent crimes, making a convicted offender ineligible for parole until serving 85 percent of the sentence. Home invasion, first-degree burglary and second-degree burglary with a firearm were also added to the list of crimes that qualify under Connecticut’s three-strikes law.

“Residents need to feel safe and secure, especially in their own homes, and we wanted them to know those convicted of violent crimes will be kept from society and released only under the most strict circumstances,” says Senator Toni N. Harp.



SENATOR  
TONI N. HARP  
CONNECTICUT

The General Assembly also called for an immediate, seamless way to share information among government agencies. “Information sharing was a center piece in the January session,” Lawlor says, because the parole decision for one of the men accused in the Cheshire murders “would have been handled differently if the Board of Pardons and Paroles had known the whole story.”

Meanwhile, lawmakers in Connecticut, like those in other states, are faced with the high costs of an increasing prison population. Creating a system that incapacitates the most dangerous offenders while providing alternatives such as halfway houses, employment training and drug-treatment programs for nonviolent offenders has bipartisan interest, says Lawlor.

He says the timing of the Second Chance Act, signed by President Bush in April, is optimum for Connecticut. The act provides federal grants to states for comprehensive re-entry services such as drug treatment, academic and vocational education, and mentoring programs.

“With 3,500 people leaving prison annually in Connecticut, we need a system strong in providing re-entry assistance to offenders,” Lawlor says. “Doing so protects the public, reduces recidivism, and keeps us from having to build new prisons.”