

Study Process for the Parole Board

Classified as a Youth Offender by the passing of Senate Bill 261, I was offered a parole hearing much earlier than I expected. I was convicted of 2nd degree murders, assault with a deadly weapon, and gun enhancements. I was sentenced to 30 to life, plus 11 years. My earliest possible hearing date was originally in the year 2032. Upon hearing of my scheduled hearing, which came 15 years earlier than 2032, I shifted my focus to learning everything I could about parole hearings.

Disclaimer: Youth Offender parole hearings are different than standard parole hearings. The following is my process and what I went through. Your experience may be different; even if you're a Youth Offender. I offer this as general knowledge of the parole process and cannot give specific legal advice, nor can I say that you will be granted parole if you follow this study process.

My study process consisted of the following:

- Read Transcripts (as many as possible)
- Learn the stages of the board hearing
- Read up on Anti-Social Personality Disorder (This is what the Psych labels most of us)
- Read up on the commissioners
 - Learn their pet peeves
 - Learn their backgrounds
- Do mock hearings (as many as possible)
 - Study the parole board's frequently asked questions and use them in mock hearings
- Pick the brains of those who have been found suitable as well as those who were denied
- Really learn causative factors that led to the crime (Be honest with yourself)
- Read books on how to address causative factors
 - Do book reports on them
- Write and learn your life story (be honest with yourself here as well)
- Study up on groups you took a long time ago, especially if they helped you address your causative factors

In my experience it seems like you really need to know yourself, why you committed your crime, why you're no longer a threat to society and how you can properly deal with the triggers that lead to your crime. You also have to be able to talk about your crime, show that you understand it's impacts, and show sincere remorse.

In knowing your triggers you should also be aware of which groups helped the most to address them. Make sure you've taken these groups and that you're able to articulate the growth and change that you got from them. If you aren't able, then it looks like you were just sitting in the groups to appease the board.

Transcripts

When reading transcripts try to put yourself in the boardroom. Look at what's really behind the question. Consider what you're being asked to demonstrate. Imagine how you would answer the question yourself. Then, consider whether it makes sense. Transcripts can also be used to set up mock hearings. Learn the format and look for it so you'll be prepared for all of the stages of the hearing and know where you are as the hearing progresses. This will help you shape your answers.

The stages are:

- Pre-conviction
 - Childhood
 - Family history
 - School and friends
 - Environmental influences
- The crime itself
 - This is where you go into detail about your crime
- Post-conviction
 - This is all in-prison behavior; good and bad
 - Be able to talk about the negatives: 114's, 115's, 1030's, and 128's
 - Be able to talk about programs, vocations, and everything positive
- Parole plans
 - Re-entry
 - Transitional housing
 - Jobs
 - Relapse prevention
 - Tools to combat triggers
 - Drug and alcohol relapse prevention
 - Domestic violence prevention
- D.A. questioning
 - Field questions from the D.A.
- Closing
 - D.A. does their closing
 - Your lawyer does their closing
 - You do you own
 - Victims and survivors (if any show up) have the last say
- Deliberations
- Decision

The commissioners laid out the day for me in this order. However there isn't always a clear cut from section to section. There can be overlap. Some of your childhood traumas can be present in your 115's. Or, you could apply some of what you learned in the groups to your relapse prevention plan. Also, the hearing was almost an exact mirror of the psych hearing. So have all of these preparations and studies done before that and it will help immensely.

In the Pre-conviction phase, the board is looking to see how you came to be the person who committed your crime. So be blunt and be honest, but don't blame. It's ok to say that abuse affected you. Just know in what way and how it shaped your view of the world and yourself. Also, know how all of your childhood led to you normalizing a criminal lifestyle and how it led to you committing your crime.

In telling the story of the crime, there is no definitive way to answer this. The only advice that I see in this area as being a standard to live by is "Do not minimize anything". Sometimes the commissioner will ask you what happened the day of your crime. Sometimes they'll say, "tell me about the crime". And the answers that each commissioner is looking for vary. Some will allow a very detailed description that include names, feelings, and a whole story. Some may want a very accountable and concise version. Just never minimize.

Post-conviction is tricky. Nobody's in-prison behavior is identical to anyone else's. But in a general sense, talking about write ups or negative behavior, what I did was own it. Relate it to the causative factors that lead to crime, show that you understand the impacts of it, and then show that you're not that person anymore. I was no angel in prison, but I owned it and talked about it very honestly and showed a deep regret for the idiotic ways that I acted and for the people I harmed through those actions.

In regards to positive behavior, I took the classes that were necessary for a rehabilitation that addressed all my causative factors. I knew all my groups and was ready to articulate what I got out of them. Another thing that helped me was my willingness to make amends. I had a good record of donating to charities and being of service to many groups and organizations that are dedicated to positive social change. (Pro-social change!)

Regarding parole plans, I wrote them up very early and studied them often. I discussed them with the board in the same way they were laid out on paper. I had a plan for the 1st and 2nd days, the first month, 1st year and long term plans. In your long term plans make sure you express the plan of paying off ALL of your restitution and have a budgeting plan to make that happen.

Parole plans also include a relapse prevention plan. I made mine with a list of triggers, how I notice them, and a list of tools that I have to combat them. I also had a list of people who are my support network and what type of support they are offering me. I was able to talk about the transitional houses that I planned on going to and why. I also had letters showing that I had jobs lined up upon my release.

The D.A. questioning phase is another tricky part. You never know what they were keyed in on while you were talking to the commissions. All I can say is try not to get frustrated or angry. Stay calm and

remember to be honest. Honesty throughout my entire hearing was key for me. It allowed for me to never get tripped up on lies and when I was questioned again on a specific topic I just restated my truth. In the end, the commissioners both commended me on my honesty and on the fact that I didn't minimize anything.

After the D.A. questioning, the D.A. will do their closing argument. It's pretty common that they ask for a finding of unsuitability.

Next, your lawyer will do their closing argument in support of your suitability for parole and do their best to paint you in the best light possible. When that's done you'll have an opportunity to make your final argument. I wrote mine down and read it into the record. I apologized to everyone; Especially the victims and their families. I let them know that I am no longer the person I was when I let my causative factors run my life. I mentioned that I now have many tools to combat the issues I had when I was younger.

Survivors and/or Next of Kin will then have an opportunity to speak (if they are present). They are allowed to attend by phone as well. If they are present, their opportunity to speak comes at the very end.

Lastly, is the decision. They'll reconvene the hearing to read their findings into the record. At that point there's nothing for you to do. Hopefully it goes your way. If not, learn from what they say, get what they ask you for and then get your date on the next one.

Studying commissioners

To study commissioners I had family and friends print out bios and backgrounds of each commissioner. I learned their pet peeves, and what they look for in someone who is suitable for parole. You can also make notes about commissioners from transcripts that you read.

Mock hearings

During mock hearings we used transcripts to frame the hearing in a way that is consistent with the format of all hearings. We used frequently asked questions that applied to me, (Some were very hard at first, but that's why you practice). We used psych reports, lists and timelines of my traumatic events and timelines of all my write-ups (115's, 128's, 114's, and 1030's) I also gave my mock commissioner a copy of my parole packet. From there the developed questions that I most likely would be asked.

Picking peoples' brains

When I did this, I was looking for insights into the commissioners, the feel of the room, and what to expect. I'd ask, "what was it like", "how was the mood", "what did they ask that was hardest for you?"

These questions and any others you can think of will be helpful and most of the people I asked were happy to help.

Learning causative factors

This you should have done in many groups already. It's basically taking the timelines that you make and whittling them down to the core issues that shaped your world view. In my study group we used what we referred to as "The Grid" (See attached). In the grid you list events, the traumas, and everything that came out of it. The board calls this insight.

Read books and did book reports

After you have honestly looked at your life and identified your main issues, read up on them so you can go more in-depth as to how they'll no longer be issues for you.

Know your life story

Attached are guiding questions on writing your life story. Writing this out is important so that you can have a full narrative of your life and tell the most complete story of to the commissioners. It's painful but necessary. It also helps you move past the my-childhood-was-good narrative that we tell ourselves.

Study up on groups

I had taken quite a few groups and my participation spanned several years. It’s good to have that type of record for the board. However, some of what you learned can get lost. Save up as much material as you can in those cramped cells, so that you can study and refresh yourself on the material. This will ensure that you don’t get caught off guard when the commissioners ask you questions about groups you took years and years ago.

The Grid

Event/Trauma (Causative Factors)	Feelings	Stories you told yourself about the event	Character defects developed	Behaviors/crimes committed
Ex. Mom neglected me	Sad, lonely, helpless, scared	I’m unloveable, I’m worthless, I need to find a way to be loved and accepted	Selfish, self-centered	Joined gang, fights, used drugs and alcohol, used women

Discussion topic: Feelings that trigger violence and substance abuse

While experiencing anger, people have a 69% chance of committing an act of violence
And only a 23% chance of substance abuse.

While experiencing fear, people have a 47% chance of committing an act of violence; and only a 29% chance of substance abuse

While experiencing anxiety, people have a 44% chance of committing an act of violence; and only a 33% chance of substance abuse

While experiencing helplessness, people have a 36% chance of committing an act of violence; and only a 35% chance of substance abuse

While experiencing embarrassment, people have a 33% chance of committing an act of violence; and only a 53% chance of substance abuse

While feeling hurt, people have a 23% chance of committing an act of violence; and only a 62% chance of substance abuse

What are the differences?

Why do some of these increase chances of committing violent acts?

Why do some of these increase chances of substance abuse?

In knowing these, it will help you understand your own violence and substance abuse. It will help you speak about the emotions that led to your crime and substance abuse.

Answer the following questions to help write your life story

When and where were you born?

Who are/were your parents? Where were they from and what do/did they do to earn a living? What are/were they like as people? How did they influence your life?

Do you have any siblings? When were they born? What did you think of each one as a child? As an adult?

What was it like growing up? Do you remember your childhood as happy or unhappy? Why? Give specific recollections about how you felt you were treated by others; About how family members communicated with one another. About family relationships, friends, important people in your life.

How did you feel about school? Were there any teachers who had a particularly strong influence on you?

Did you have any pets? If so what part did they play in your life?

Were you ever abused as a child? Emotionally, physically, or sexually?

How was school for you? What grades did you complete? Where there any traumas or incidents at school?

What do you remember about the first time you noticed alcohol being used in your home? Outside of it? How did you feel about this? What did you think when you first saw a drunk? What can you recall about your parents' drinking habits or their use of drugs? Did siblings use drugs while you were growing up? How did alcohol or drugs affect your life when you were growing up?

How and when did you have your first drink? Use your first illicit drug? How did you feel about these experiences?

When did your drinking or drug use first get you in trouble?

Do you remember any other examples of problems caused by your alcoholism? DUI's, Fights, problems at home, work or school? Accidents? Spouse abuse, stealing or lying?

Did your drinking hurt others or anyone you care about?

Have you ever done something you were ashamed of while under the influence?

What about your social life? With whom did you usually spend your time? Where did you spend most of your time? Who was the most important constructive influence in your life? The most destructive?

What kind of work do you do? Do you enjoy it? How was it affected by your alcoholism?

Have you ever tried to or actually became sober and then slip? Describe the experience and what you think triggered the slip. Describe your previous treatment experiences, if any.

When you think you're finished, go over what you've written and be sure no major events and no time spans have been left out. Also be sure you've described your feelings in each case. IF there are any glaring gaps, this could indicate a problem area that needs a closer look.

When you finally feel like your life story is complete, you can add on or make a separate story about your epiphany moments. Show the gradual steps it took for you to become the person you are today. We all know you don't change instantly. Not like a light switch.

It's good to show that you can point to events in your life that gave you significant growth into the person you are today. Having that mapped out a different type of insight. Insight into your growth.

Another good thing to write about is relapse issues. Give examples of a desire to relapse and how you overcame it.

In this writing it's good to write about a particularly stressful events like disrespect on the basketball court, canteen line, or loss of a loved one. Write about what feelings and emotions came up. How did you notice them? What did you want to do? Drink? Use drugs? Or commit an act of violence? Go into detail about the thought process that led you to respond in a way that is indicative of someone who is ready to be released.

Apology letters are important to have. You should write one to each victim (If there are multiple victims), one to their families, and one to your family. You can also write one to anyone you feel you've harmed in the commission of your crime. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of people that you've harmed and writing to everyone involved in your case could take years. For those people it's good to at least have a list of the people you can think of so if you're asked who the crime harmed you can talk about everybody. Like, detectives in your case, first responders, jurors and the judge, people who read the story or watched it on the news, the people who became fearful for their safety just by knowing about your crime. There's also the immediate neighborhood in which your crime took place. Being able to talk about this shows that you really tried to understand the depths of the impact your crime had.

Going back to the letters you write, one thing that helped me see the loss I created, was going back and reading my transcripts. I read the parts where the survivors and next-of-kin got to express their feelings of loss. I read about who the people were before I took their lives. It's painful, but it really helps you understand the impacts of what you've done.

Lastly, I would say, don't wait to make the changes in your life that are necessary for you to come home. Start now. Stay studying and improving your life and the lives of others around you. It's hard work, but it's definitely worth it. GOOD LUCK!!!