

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: GOV. BRANDSTAD DISAPPOINTS BY NOT PROVIDING JUSTICE TO SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Des Moines, Iowa - October 5, 2011 - The Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Skylark Project are deeply disappointed by Governor Branstad's decision not to commute and reduce the sentences of Tracy Dyess and Yvette Louisell.

The governor of Iowa is uniquely empowered to consider each individual applicant and her particular circumstances. Yet throughout the interviews with the Board of Parole and in the content of his press releases, Governor Branstad made clear that he does not want to spend his energy seriously considering these cases. Relying on past judgments, he is not considering the applicants as individuals capable of change.

In many cases, previous administrations similarly missed the opportunity to examine closely the circumstances of each applicant. In the last twenty years in Iowa, only three women have been granted commutation: one woman by Governor Branstad in 1992, one woman by Governor Vilsack in 2006, and one woman by Governor Culver in 2011. Each of these women is a survivor of domestic abuse. While we applaud the action in those cases, there are many more cases which deserve review.

Commutation is a necessary process, because we know the criminal justice system is imperfect. Commutation enables a governor to review a case with fresh eyes, after the sensationalism of a trial has past. With the benefit of time, the governor can consider new knowledge we now have about how trauma and/or youth can affect a victim's decisionmaking abilities. In order for our system to be valid and meaningful, we need the process of commutation to be able to acknowledge and correct our mistakes.

Compounding the injustice of denying commutation, domestic violence and sexual assault programs in Iowa are currently underfunded. At least two of the most recent commutation applicants are survivors of abuse, and their experiences are not rare. As state funding shrinks, domestic violence shelters and outreach programs struggle to offer necessary services. When victims cannot find safety at domestic violence programs, the danger increases. More women will likely be forced to turn to crime or extreme measures in order to stay alive and escape abuse. If the Governor and state legislators do not properly fund victim service providers, there will be even more victims convicted of crime and locked away without recourse.

Now more than ever, the Governor of Iowa must shoulder great responsibility to keep the people of Iowa safe: he must exercise compassion when judging commutation applications, and he must properly fund domestic violence and sexual assault programs. If domestic violence and sexual assault programs are not fully funded by the state legislature, there will likely be more women in prison in the future.

About ICADV:

The Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence seeks to engage all people in a movement to change the social and political systems that perpetuate violence against women. We do this through education, advocacy, and quality victim services. For more information about text-to-donate or domestic violence, please visit www.icadv.org or call 515-244-8028.

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