

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security



PAROLE BOARD

12 Mercer Road  
Natick, Massachusetts 01760

Charles D. Baker  
Governor

Karyn Polito  
Lieutenant Governor

Thomas A. Turco III  
Secretary

Telephone # (508) 650-4500  
Facsimile # (508) 650-4599

Gloriann Moroney  
Chair

Kevin Keefe  
Executive Director

**DECISION**

**IN THE MATTER OF**

**BRETT CHRISTIANSON**

**W63314**

**TYPE OF HEARING:** Review Hearing

**DATE OF HEARING:** January 24, 2019

**DATE OF DECISION:** January 8, 2020

**PARTICIPATING BOARD MEMBERS:** Dr. Charlene Bonner, Tonomey Coleman, Sheila Dupre, Tina Hurley, Gloriann Moroney,<sup>1</sup> Colette Santa

**DECISION OF THE BOARD:** After careful consideration of all relevant facts, including the nature of the underlying offense, the age of the inmate at the time of offense, criminal record, institutional record, the inmate's testimony at the hearing, and the views of the public as expressed at the hearing or in written submissions to the Board, we conclude by unanimous vote that the inmate is not a suitable candidate for parole. Parole is denied with a review scheduled in two years from the date of the hearing.

**I. STATEMENT OF THE CASE**

On September 24, 1997, in Suffolk Superior Court, Brett Christianson pleaded guilty to arson and to the second degree murder of Nordella Newson. He was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole for the murder of Ms. Newson. Mr. Christianson was also sentenced to a consecutive term in prison of not more than 15 years, and not less than 12 years, for his conviction of arson.

Prior to her death, Ms. Newson had employed Mr. Christianson to run errands for her. However, in the month preceding Ms. Newson's murder, Mr. Christianson had stolen approximately \$500 from her apartment. On the evening of March 27, 1996, Ms. Newson was

<sup>1</sup> Board Member Moroney abstained from the vote, as she was not a Board Member at the time of hearing.

home alone in her apartment in the South End neighborhood of Boston. At approximately 9:00 p.m., the buzzer in Ms. Newson's apartment was activated, indicating that someone at the apartment building's front door was attempting to gain entry into the premises. Ms. Newson opened the front door to her apartment, but closed it when no one was there. Sometime thereafter, Mr. Christianson entered Ms. Newson's apartment with the intent of robbing her. In order to carry out the robbery, Mr. Christianson attempted to subdue Ms. Newson. When Ms. Newson resisted, Mr. Christianson placed his hand over her mouth and strangled her. In the ensuing struggle, Ms. Newson suffered blunt force trauma to her head, as well as a punctured lung when Mr. Christianson stabbed her in the chest. Before fleeing the scene, Mr. Christianson set fire to the apartment. When Ms. Newson was discovered by neighbors, who attempted to save her, post mortem burns and soot marks were visible on her body. At the time of her murder, Ms. Newson was 85-years-old.

## **II. PAROLE HEARING ON JANUARY 24, 2019**

Brett Christianson, now 59-years-old, appeared before the Parole Board on January 24, 2019, for a review hearing. He was represented by Northeastern University School of Law Student Meaghan Sheridan. Mr. Christianson was denied parole after both his 2011 initial hearing and his 2016 review hearing. In Mr. Christianson's opening statement to the Board, he apologized to the victim's family, as well as the community, for his actions. He praised Ms. Newson as having been an intelligent and charismatic community leader and a good neighbor.

When Board Members questioned him about his life leading up to the murder, Mr. Christianson described leaving an abusive household in Maine at age 21, moving to Boston, and ending up homeless for a time. He was an alcoholic, who was addicted to crack cocaine and worked as a prostitute. Mr. Christianson admitted to stealing up to \$2,500 from Ms. Newson over several years to support his drug and alcohol addictions. He reported that he had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and suffered from neuro-syphilis, which caused him to have paranoid delusions. Although he admitted to being obsessed with serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer prior to the murder, Mr. Christianson denied that he wanted to kill anyone. In discussing the murder of Ms. Newson with Board Members, Mr. Christianson described drinking two pitchers of beer at a club and then deciding to rob her. He rang various doorbells until he gained entrance into the apartment. Mr. Christianson described how he struck Ms. Newson, knocking her nearly unconscious. He then stabbed her when he could not find money where he thought it was hidden. Mr. Christianson also admitted to setting the apartment on fire in order to cover up his crime.

The Board also discussed Mr. Christianson's institutional history. Mr. Christianson claimed that his ulcerative colitis makes it difficult for him to complete programming. He has completed Path to Freedom and is waitlisted for other programs. Mr. Christianson works in Industry over six hours a day, five days a week, making clothes. He attends either Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous every week. Mr. Christianson told the Board that his last disciplinary report was in 2013, when he threw away a freezer box and another inmate took it out of the garbage. In regard to parole, Mr. Christianson asked the Board for a release to his 12 to 15 year from and after sentence. Eventually, he hopes to step down to minimum security, proceed to transitional housing, and then live with his siblings in Maine.

Suffolk County Assistant District Attorney Charles Bartoloni testified in opposition to parole and submitted a letter of opposition. Boston Police Commissioner William Gross submitted a letter of opposition, as well.

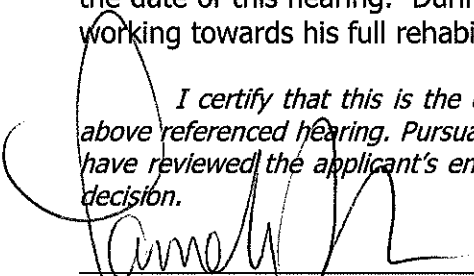
### **III. DECISION**

Mr. Christianson has yet to demonstrate a level of rehabilitation that would make his release compatible with the welfare of society. He should engage in additional treatment/programming to address his causative factors.

The applicable standard used by the Board to assess a candidate for parole is: "Parole Board Members shall only grant a parole permit if they are of the opinion that there is a reasonable probability that, if such offender is released, the offender will live and remain at liberty without violating the law and that release is not incompatible with the welfare of society." 120 C.M.R. 300.04. In forming this opinion, the Board has taken into consideration Mr. Christianson's institutional behavior as well as his participation in available work, educational, and treatment programs during the period of his incarceration. The Board has also considered whether risk reduction programs could effectively minimize Mr. Christianson's risk of recidivism. After applying this standard to the circumstances of Mr. Christianson's case, the Board is of the unanimous opinion that Brett Christianson is not yet rehabilitated and, therefore, does not merit parole at this time.

Mr. Christianson's next appearance before the Board will take place in two years from the date of this hearing. During the interim, the Board encourages Mr. Christianson to continue working towards his full rehabilitation.

*I certify that this is the decision and reasons of the Massachusetts Parole Board regarding the above referenced hearing. Pursuant to G.L. c. 127, § 130, I further certify that all voting Board Members have reviewed the applicant's entire criminal record. This signature does not indicate authorship of the decision.*

  
Pamela Murphy, General Counsel

1/8/2020  
Date