



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security



PAROLE BOARD

12 Mercer Road
Natick, Massachusetts 01760

Maura T. Healey
Governor

Kimberley Driscoll
Lieutenant Governor

Gina K. Kwon
Secretary

Telephone: (508)-650-4500

Facsimile: (508)-650-4598

Angelo Gomez, Jr.
Chair

Lian Hogan
Executive Director

RECORD OF DECISION

IN THE MATTER OF

DARKENS BONNETT
W100044

TYPE OF HEARING: Initial Hearing

DATE OF HEARING: November 12, 2025

DATE OF DECISION: March 12, 2026

PARTICIPATING BOARD MEMBERS: Edith J. Alexander, Dr. Charlene Bonner, Sarah B. Coughlin, Angelo Gomez Jr., James Kelcourse, Rafael Ortiz

VOTE: Parole is granted to CRJ in 2 weeks from the date of Decision.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY: On January 30, 2012, following a jury trial in Essex Superior Court, Darkens Bonnett was convicted of murder in the first-degree for the death of Vincent Gaskins. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

On February 29, 2012, in Essex Superior Court, Mr. Bonnett pleaded guilty to armed assault with intent to rob, assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, possession of a firearm without an FID card, and receiving stolen property for charges stemming from a shooting on May 18, 2010. Mr. Bonnett was sentenced to 3 years to 3 years and a day to run concurrently with his life sentence.

Mr. Bonnett became parole eligible following the Supreme Judicial Court's decision in Commonwealth v. Mattis, 493 Mass. 216 (2024), where the court held that sentencing individuals who were ages 18 through 20 at the time of the offense (emerging adults) to life without the possibility of parole is unconstitutional. As a result of the SJC's decision regarding his first-degree murder conviction, Mr. Bonnett was re-sentenced to life with the possibility of parole after 15 years.

On November 12, 2025, Mr. Bonnett appeared before the Board for an initial hearing. He was represented by Attorney Amy Belger. The Board's decision fully incorporates by reference the entire video recording of Mr. Bonnett's November 12, 2025, hearing.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE: On November 22, 2009, 18-year old Darkens Bonnett, shot and killed 30-year-old Vincent Gaskins outside of a nightclub in Lynn. That evening, Mr. Gaskins was leaving the nightclub with his girlfriend when he began arguing with a man with whom he had previously had an altercation. Mr. Bonnett was in the crowd that began to congregate outside of the nightclub. As the argument escalated, witnesses heard a "pop" and saw Mr. Bonnett standing over Mr. Gaskins, tucking a gun into his pants. Mr. Bonnett then fled in the direction of Tremont Street with a group of about ten others. Mr. Bonnett was later heard admitting to his involvement in the shooting, stating that he and Mr. Gaskins "had words after the club," and that he (Darkens Bonnett) subsequently "shot him in the face."

A firearm had been discarded in nearby bushes on Tremont Street and was discovered by police shortly after the shooting. Two latent prints and a DNA profile were recovered from the firearm. A forensic examiner opined that both the palm print found on the back of the firearm and the major DNA profile taken from the firearm matched that of Mr. Bonnett.

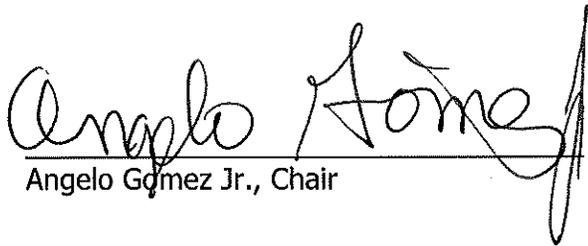
APPLICABLE STANDARD: Parole "[p]ermits shall be granted only if the Board is of the opinion, after consideration of a risk and needs assessment, that there is a reasonable probability that, if the prisoner is released with appropriate conditions and community supervision, the prisoner will live and remain at liberty without violating the law and that release is not incompatible with the welfare of society." M.G.L. c. 127, § 130. In making this determination, the Board takes into consideration an inmate's institutional behavior, their participation in available work, educational, and treatment programs during the period of incarceration, and whether risk reduction programs could effectively minimize the inmate's risk of recidivism. M.G.L. c. 127, § 130. The Board also considers all relevant facts, including the nature of the underlying offense, the age of the inmate at the time of the offense, the criminal record, the institutional record, the inmate's testimony at the hearing, and the views of the public as expressed at the hearing and/or in written submissions to the Board.

Where a parole candidate was convicted of first-degree murder for a crime committed when he was ages 18 through 20 years old, the Board considers the "unique aspects" of emerging adulthood that distinguish emerging adult offenders from older offenders. Commonwealth v. Mattis, 493 Mass. 216, 238 (2024). Individuals who were emerging adults at the time of the offense must be afforded a "meaningful opportunity to obtain release based on demonstrated maturity and rehabilitation" and the Board evaluates "the circumstances surrounding the commission of the crime, including the age of the offender, together with all relevant information pertaining to the offender's character and actions during the intervening years since conviction." Id. (citing Diatchenko v. District Attorney for the Suffolk Dist., 466 Mass. 655, 674 (2013) (Diatchenko I); Miller v. Alabama, 567 U.S. 460, 471 (2012); Graham v. Florida, 560 U.S. 48, 75 (2010)). Since brain development in emerging adulthood is ongoing, the Board also considers the following factors when evaluating parole candidates who committed the underlying offenses as an emerging adult: 1) a lack of impulse control in emotionally arousing situations; 2) an increased likelihood to engage in risk taking behaviors in pursuit of reward; 3) increased susceptibility to peer influence which makes emerging adults more likely to engage in risky behavior; and 4) an emerging adult's greater capacity for change. See Mattis, 493 Mass. at 225-229.

DECISION OF THE BOARD: Mr. Bonnett appeared before the Board for an initial hearing after becoming parole eligible as a result of the Supreme Judicial Court's decision in Mattis. Mr. Bonnett was 18-years-old at the time of the offense, and the Board considered the characteristics of the emerging adult brain. He has had no disciplinary reports in the last 10 years. He completed his GED. He has enrolled in the Boston College Liberal Arts program and reports he wishes to continue with his educational pursuits. He has been consistently employed and is participating in the NEADS program. The Board considered the forensic evaluation of Dr. DiCataldo. Mr. Bonnett has been in minimum security since May 2025. He has strong community support. The Board considered the testimony of a social worker, as well as Mr. Bonnett's friends and family, in support of parole. The Board considered the oral and written testimony of Mr. Gaskins' family members and friends in opposition to parole. The Board also considered the opposition letter from the Lynn Chief of Police and the opposition testimony of Essex County ADA James Gubitose. The Board concludes by unanimous decision that Darkens Bonnett has demonstrated a level of rehabilitation that would make his release compatible with the welfare of society.

SPECIAL CONDITIONS: Waive work for 2 weeks or program; Must be home between 10 PM and 6 AM or at Parole Officer's discretion; Electronic monitoring for 6 months; Supervise for drugs, testing in accordance with Agency policy; Supervise for liquor abstinence, testing in accordance with Agency policy; Report to assigned MA Parole Office on day of release; No contact with victim's family; May have contact with [2 named individuals]; Must have mental health counseling for adjustment; Long Term Residential Treatment - CRJ.

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.


Angelo Gomez Jr., Chair

March 12, 2026
Date