



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James Tedisco

## Tedisco, Zurlo, Heggen & Crime Victim Families Call for “Christopher’s and Deanna’s Law” to Keep Dangerous Criminals Locked Up

SENATOR JIM TEDISCO July 7, 2022



**Ballston Spa, NY**--Senator Jim Tedisco today joined with Saratoga County Sheriff Michael Zurlo and Saratoga County District Attorney Karen Heggen to call for passage of “Christopher and Deanna’s Law” to enhance the voices of crime victims and their families in parole hearings to keep dangerous criminals behind bars and better protect our communities.

Tedisco, Zurlo and Heggen were joined by Michael and Regina Stewart and Brian and Debbie Rivers, the parents of the late Shenendehowa students Christopher Stewart and Deanna Rivers, who were killed in 2012 on the Northway by a drunk, drugged and serial dangerous driver. Dennis Drue, the individual who killed Christopher and Deanna, is up for parole this month, causing further heartache for the families who go through this process every two years.

Tedisco named "Christopher's and Deanna's Law" ([S.2046/A.5335](#)) in their memory. The bill requires all victim impact statements to be video recorded and mandates all Parole Board members who vote on parole for an offender, must watch the videos before making their decision, if the members do not meet with victims and their families in person.

Shockingly, when victims and families give their impact statements to the Parole Board, they may only speak to one board member, with no guarantee that individual will be on the panel to make or be part of the decision as to whether to parole or not. In New York this frustrating situation is faced by many crime victims and their families who want to make their voices heard.

Also joining Senator Tedisco and company at the event were Nancy Izzo, Carol Desadore and Patty Ramnes, the sisters of the late Mechanicville Police Officer Paul Luther who was shot and murdered in 1976. Officer Luther's killer, Kenyon Pruyn, is again up for parole.

Senator Tedisco, Sheriff Zurlo, D.A. Heggen and the families also called for passage of legislation, co-sponsored by Tedisco and prime sponsored by Senator Anthony Palumbo to extend the waiting period between parole hearings from 24 to 60 months in cases where the inmate applying for parole was sentenced for a violent crime ([S.5175/A.5803](#)).

“New York has a broken parole system that makes it difficult for crime victims and their families to have meaningful input on decisions about whether to free those convicted of violent crimes. No one understands this more than the families of the late Shenendehowa students Deanna Rivers and Christopher Stewart who were tragically killed by a drunk, drugged and dangerous driver and the family of Mechanicville Police Officer Paul Luther who was murdered in cold blood. It’s time to put victims first by passing ‘Christopher’s and Deanna’s Law’ to ensure victim impact statements are video recorded and pass the bill to extend parole hearings from two to five years,” said Senator Jim Tedisco.

“We can be compassionate for people who have made mistakes, done their time, and are trying to turn their lives around, but first and foremost, we need justice and compassion for crime victims. If our state’s leaders want to be serious about turning things around in New York and stop the mass exodus of people fleeing the state, then they must make fighting crime and public safety priority number one and that start’s with supporting a ‘Victims First’ agenda,” said Senator Jim Tedisco.

“On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1976, my friend and partner Patrolman Paul Luther was shot and killed in the line of duty while on patrol in the City of Mechanicville. I have attended parole hearings and written letters on behalf of the family of Paul Luther who anguish through victim impact statements every two years to keep this cop killer behind bars. The Stewart and Rivers families face the same heart-wrenching procedure every two years as well. I want to thank Senator Tedisco for championing this legislation to reform the parole process and protect the rights of victims by videotaping victim impact statements and extending the hearings from 24 to 60 months,” said Saratoga County Sheriff Michael Zurlo.

“As prosecutors, the men and women in my office work daily with crime victims to guide them through the court process. Once a defendant is convicted and sentenced, the parole system seems to sometimes miss ensuring that crime victims voices continue to be heard

when a convicted perpetrator is considered for parole. I support efforts to make sure crime victims voices are heard and considered by the members of the parole board each time a convicted defendant is eligible for parole,” said Saratoga County District Attorney Karen Heggen.

“Having no knowledge as to how the state’s judicial system worked from the victim side, it was overwhelming to learn about it first-hand after losing our son Christopher Stewart to a drunk/high driver. The frustrations have been many through the parole process which is not sensitive to suffering families. Of utmost concern was having to pour our heartfelt emotions out to one parole board member who may or may not have attended the parole hearing. We were left hoping that our message got conveyed to the rest of the Parole Board. Senator Tedisco’s legislation, ‘Christopher’s and Deanna’s Law’ will give families like ours the peace of mind that every Parole Board member is required to witness the devastating loss and emotional impact caused by the convicted criminal who is up for parole. We know this legislation will come too late for us, but it will most certainly help future families who end up where we did,” said Michael and Regina Stewart, parents of Christopher Stewart.

“We are 100% in support of Senator Tedisco’s “Victims First” Agenda. The way we were dismissed by the Commissioner during our victim impact statement in June was revolting.

This is not ok, losing a child to a ticking time bomb driver waiting to explode is not ok and the way the Parole Board and commissioners handle victim impact statements is not ok. Victims voices need to be heard now,” said Debbie and Brian Rivers, parents of Deanna Rivers

“Our brother, Patrolman Paul Luther, Badge 119, age 21, of the Mechanicville Police Department was killed in the line of duty on October 30, 1976. In addition, that evening a civilian was killed, a police officer was severely wounded, as well as 9 other individuals. While

we are thankful for the opportunity to provide a victim impact statement, we've never understood why we do not provide our statement directly to the parole board commissioner(s) assigned to the inmate's parole hearing. In our mind, it's impossible for the parole board members to get a true sense of the long-lasting effects of that evening simply by reviewing a file. We feel it would be more impactful for the presiding commissioners of the parole hearing to review the victim impact statement video as Senator Tedisco has proposed. We also support Senator Tedisco's efforts to extend parole hearings from the current 24 to 60 months and thank him for his continued support of the family members of these horrific crimes as it relates to the parole process," said Nancy Izzo, sister of the late Mechanicville Police Officer Paul Luther.



**Pictured are Heggen, Zurlo, Tedisco with the family of slain Mechanicville Police Officer Paul Luther: Patty Ramnes (sister of Paul Luther) and her husband Jeff Ramnes, Carol Desadore (sister of Paul Luther) and husband Steve Desadore, Nancy Izzo (with orange sweater -- sister of Paul Luther), Erin Luciano (Paul Luther's niece), and Meghan Russo (Paul Luther's niece).**