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Inquirer Editorial: Free Willie

William Barnes remains behind bars on charges so flimsy it's clear that justice isn't his prosecutors' goal.

A jury acquitted Barnes in May in the death of a Philadelphia police officer who died of an infection 41 years after he was shot by Barnes. But he has been kept in prison for more than three years for minor parole violations.

Barnes was caught carrying a cell phone and car keys without permission from his parole officer. It seems unlikely that anyone else would be jailed for such petty charges. But the Pennsylvania parole board can end this travesty by releasing the elderly inmate.

A former career criminal, Barnes is no saint. In 1966, he shot a rookie cop, who was left paralyzed. But Barnes served his time - 16 years for attempted murder.

His victim, former officer Walter Barclay, died in 2007. Then-District Attorney Lynne Abraham subsequently charged Barnes with murder, alleging Barclay's death was a direct result of the shooting 41 years earlier.

A jury didn't buy that argument and Barnes was acquitted. But that didn't stop prosecutors from punishing him by blocking his release on the parole violations.

At age 74 and in failing health, Barnes no longer poses a threat to public safety. He has expressed remorse. Release him.

Barnes was working at a Roxborough supermarket when he was arrested three years ago.

He also gave anti-crime lectures at Temple University and Eastern State Penitentiary, now a museum, where he once served time.

The parole board should consider those factors in his favor.

Not to mention that keeping Barnes in prison costs taxpayer dollars, while doing nothing to serve justice.

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