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# Obama commutes Springfield man's prison sentence

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JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

**President Obama.**

**By Laura Crimaldi**

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 30, 2016

Since Manuel Colon was arrested in June 2003 on cocaine charges, his father died, his youngest

daughter was born, and he became a grandfather four times over.

But after nearly 13 years in custody, the 43-year-old Springfield man is headed home. President Obama commuted Colon's federal prison sentence Wednesday.

"I'm very, very happy," Colon's mother, Maria, said by phone.

Colon had been ordered to spend 20 years in prison under the sentencing laws in effect when he was punished in 2007 but is now scheduled to be released July 28, the White House said.

Colon's commutation was among 61 announced Wednesday by the Obama administration.

All the inmates are serving time for drug possession, possession with intent to sell, or related crimes. Most are nonviolent offenders, though a few were also convicted of firearms violations.

The commutations bring to 248 the number of inmates whose sentences Obama has commuted. The White House said that is more than the past six presidents combined.

Another Massachusetts man, Carlos Lopez of Lawrence, had his sentence for crack cocaine and firearm charges commuted in December by Obama. He is to be freed next month.

Colon's sister, who is also named Maria, said she has been waiting to get married until her brother's release.

"I've been waiting for him to give me away, so I guess I'm going to have a wedding now," she said.

Colon was among 19 people charged by federal authorities in 2003 with participating in a large-scale drug trafficking operation involving cocaine and heroin, court records show.

In September 2005, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine, cocaine base, and heroin; and possession with intent to distribute



HANDOUT

**Maria Colon (left) and her son Manuel Colon.**

cocaine.

At Colon's sentencing in US District Court in Springfield on Jan. 25, 2007, Judge Michael A. Ponsor said he was required by law to impose a 20-year prison term, though he believed the punishment was too harsh.

"This is a terribly sad day for Mr. Colon and his family, but I do believe that the statutory minimum mandatory sentence here leaves me no discretion," Ponsor said, according to a transcript filed in court. If he had the authority, Ponsor said he would have likely imposed a more lenient punishment.

"I want it to be clear that I don't view myself as having that option here, and so I'm going to proceed now to impose the sentence that I think the law passed by Congress requires me to impose," he said.

If Colon were punished for the same crimes today, sentencing guidelines would have locked him up for no more than nine years, according to a letter written by his lawyer and filed in court.

"Mr. Colon's commutation is just and fair," the lawyer, Stephen Jonas, said in a statement. "His 2003 offense was a nonviolent, low-level, drug offense. Had he been sentenced then under the rules in place today he would already have been released."

The US attorney's office in Massachusetts, which prosecuted Colon, did not respond to a request for comment.

Colon sought a reduced sentence through the Clemency Project 2014, which was established to provide free legal assistance to US prisoners who would probably face shorter sentences if they were punished now for the same offenses.

The Obama administration launched an initiative in 2014 to prioritize requests for shorter sentences from nonviolent, low-level offenders who have served at least 10 years in federal prison.

On Wednesday, Obama met for lunch in Washington with people whose sentences were previously commuted to hear about the challenges of reentering society.

Colon is imprisoned at Federal Medical Center Devens, west of Boston, his family said. While in prison, he earned his GED, completed job and computer training, and participated in drug abuse counseling, court records show.

Colon's mother said she spent Easter with her son. She thanked Obama for releasing him early.

"He gave me life again," Maria Colon said. "I'm going to start my life again."

*Matt Rocheleau and Lisa Tuite of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Material from Associated Press was used in this report. Laura Crimaldi can be reached at [laura.crimaldi@globe.com](mailto:laura.crimaldi@globe.com).*

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