

Dear [name of Governor; State Representative; Local Prosecutor; County Board; or City Council member],

We are calling on you to act immediately to protect the lives of the people impacted by prisons and jails in [name of state or county]. The spread of COVID-19 is a national emergency that threatens thousands of lives across our country. According to the latest estimates, the death toll from this virus could range anywhere from 200,000 to more than one million people in the United States alone. While everyone is at risk, we have a moral obligation to ensure that our most vulnerable—the elderly, the sick, those without medical care, and those unable to protect themselves from the virus—get the help they need. We have a further obligation to our community to keep the people whose job it is to work in jails and prisons, and their communities, safe.

The below decarceral guidelines are designed to prevent three things: social spreading, jail “churn,” and the deaths of vulnerable people.

Social Spreading

In order to prevent the rapid growth of COVID-19 from overburdening our health-care system and claiming lives, both those in secure facilities and the people who work in them, it is the responsibility of decision makers at every level to prevent and contain the spread of the virus by taking action to promote the most effective strategy in abating the pandemic: [social distancing](#) in order to slow “community spread.”

The Particular Issue of Jail and Prison “Churn”

Jails and Prisons combine the worst aspects of a cruise ship and a large public gathering and, thus, can be the perfect breeding ground for the spread of COVID-19. People are [constantly booked](#) into and out of jail and prison facilities and each night guards, vendors, and other jail staff are going home while others are coming in- which results in a [massive turnover](#). For example, more than half of the people in jail are only in there for [two to three days](#).

Further, enclosed structures like jails can cause COVID-19 to spread like [wildfire](#) and introducing just one person with it can lead to it impacting not just everyone inside the jail or prison but anyone leaving the facility—whether a person who is released or staff returning back to their homes— who then interacts with their communities.

Preventive Measures Cannot Be Taken in Jails and Prisons

Experts recommend that to protect the people most vulnerable from death or serious illness from COVID-19 that they be appropriately separated through [social distancing](#). Yet [separating sick people from well people](#) to prevent the disease from spreading can be nearly impossible in prison due to logistical [considerations](#).

WE ARE WRITING TO URGE YOU TO ENACT THE FOLLOWING DECARCERAL GUIDELINES:

- Reduce the local jail population by urging the release of anyone who is held pretrial and who does not pose an unreasonable safety risk to a specific person or persons.
- Reduce the prison population by urging a hold to all new state prison sentences if delaying the sentence would not pose an unreasonable risk of safety to a specific person or persons.
- Reduce the local jail population by urging the release of all people serving a misdemeanor sentence who are within six months of their release date.
- Reduce the prison and jail populations by urging the release of all people held on probation and parole technical violation detainers or sentences.
- Reduce the jail population by urging local law enforcement not to make new custodial arrests for any crimes that do not pose an unreasonable safety risk to a specific person or persons.
- Make transparent a policy, vetted by public health officials, for handling COVID-19 within each correctional facility.

We know how seriously you take your duty to protect the lives of people living and working in our prisons and jails and the surrounding communities. The health, well-being and indeed the lives of these people are in your hands. We urge you to take immediate and decisive action now to save lives. We will support you in taking the bold, but necessary, action now to protect the health of people in our community, including the most vulnerable.

Sincerely,
