

NC Justice Center Calls For Prison Population Reduction During COVID 19 Emergency

By Administrator
Tuesday, 07 April 2020 10:08 -

The North Carolina Justice Center released the following statement calling for the reduction of the state's prison population during the COVID 19 emergency.

More than 35,000 people are incarcerated in North Carolina state prisons with merely 14,000 prison staff available to secure and otherwise manage their health needs. In order to partially mitigate a catastrophic outbreak of COVID-19, it is crucial that Governor Roy Cooper, Secretary of the NC Department of Public Safety Erik A. Hooks, Attorney General Josh Stein, and local district attorneys and judges use every tool at their disposal to significantly and immediately reduce the number of people in our state prisons.

The severe understaffing of the state prisons and its destructive effects on prison safety have been frequent topics of research and discussion since the deaths of five prison staff in 2017. As of January 2019, the vacancy rate for correctional officers was almost 20 percent. As of September 2019, 27.7 percent of registered nurse positions and 28.6 percent of physician positions in North Carolina state prisons were vacant. More than 25 percent of individuals who are incarcerated in state prisons are over the age of 45, and nearly one-third have chronic medical conditions, including 71 percent of incarcerated individuals over age 50. Division of Prisons medical facilities at Central Prison and North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women do not have any ventilators.

These long-term and ongoing staffing issues severely undermine prison safety, including the delivery of health care to people in prison, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent data from the NC Department of Public Safety show these conditions have grown even worse in recent months, with the statewide prison staff vacancy rate rising to 21 percent, requiring NCDPS to suspend operations at three prisons.

While we believe those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 must be immediately released from state prisons, ultimately, the size and nature of the population released should be guided by answers to the following three questions:

1. What number must the prison population be reduced by in order for the current correctional and medical staffing levels to effectively protect the safety of the people who remain incarcerated during this unprecedented global health emergency?
2. Must the person being considered for release be incapacitated in order to avoid a significant risk to community safety?

3.

Does the person being considered for release have adequate access to (a) the basic supplies they need to ensure they remain healthy once they're released, (b) a safe home to return to that is also virus-free or an alternative community-based housing option, (c) medical and behavioral

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health medications, and (d) public benefits.

These data make desperately clear the catastrophic consequences of inaction. A broad coalition of legal and reentry services providers and advocacy organizations stand ready and eager to assist state and local decision-makers in whatever ways will facilitate swift and drastic actions to protect incarcerated people, prison and jail staff, and the public. But first we need state and local decision-makers—especially Governor Cooper, Secretary Hooks, and district attorneys across the state—to take bold actions today.