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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

Advocates and Community Leaders Begin Regular Briefings on Growing COVID-19 Crisis in New York State Prisons

Groups Renew Calls for Gov. Cuomo to Grant Emergency Clemencies and For Parole Board and State Prison System to Adopt Community Demands

(New York, NY) – The Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, VOCAL-NY, Worth Rises, and #HALTsolitary Campaign issued the following statement as COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the New York State prisons:

“We are both outraged and terrified that Gov. Cuomo has yet to take any action to release New Yorkers from prison in the wake of COVID-19. The virus is spreading, conditions are worsening, and action is desperately needed. Three people with COVID-19--2 incarcerated people and 1 staff person--have already tragically died. Many thousands of other incarcerated older people and those with compromised immune systems are at increased risk of death by this virus. We call on the governor to grant clemency now before it's too late.”

BRIEFING UPDATES: The Release Aging People in Prison Campaign (RAPP) and the Parole Preparation Project (PPP) have consolidated reports on conditions in New York State prisons. These reports come from advocates, attorneys, loved ones of incarcerated people, and direct correspondence with people in prison. These reports confirm the pervasiveness of toxic conditions, and thus necessitate immediate implementation of RAPP's and PPP's [list of demands](#) to prevent the unending spread of COVID-19 in prison. These reports underscore an abysmal lack of medical attention, hygiene products, adequate cleaning protocol, and more.

COVID-19 Cases by the Numbers:

- According to the Department of Corrections and Community Supervisions (DOCCS), 36 people in prison and 201 staff have tested positive for COVID-19.
- On March 30, 2020, Juan Mosquero, an incarcerated man at Sing Sing Correctional Facility died of COVID-19.
- A second death at Otisville Correctional Facility was reported on April 4, 2020.
- Informal tallies kept by advocates and attorneys suggest greater rates of infection—with more than 100 incarcerated people reporting symptoms—and possible additional deaths at Great Meadow Correctional Facility, Otisville and Bare Hill.
- One DOCCS personnel has died after testing positive for the virus.

Unsanitary Conditions

- Correctional Officers have been approved to wear N95 masks while working in the prisons, although only some are using them. Incarcerated people in the same prisons have been punished for wearing masks or facial coverings.
- Soap, clean garments, and other important hygiene products are out of stock, and commissaries have restricted purchases of the remaining supplies. People are resorting to washing their bodies with bleach.
- Unsanitary conditions prevail in common areas, dormitories, and cellblocks, where people are denied access to cleaning supplies and disinfectants. Some common areas are not being cleaned at all. An entire unit is forced to share a single spray bottle of diluted bleach, which provokes fears of contamination. In one facility, over 120 people are forced to share a single bathroom.
- At one facility, there is no access to running hot water or to showers, with buckets of lukewarm water being provided merely once a day. There is also no toilet paper, and there are reports of incarcerated people having to use socks instead.
- Sick staff are reporting to work for mailroom and security shifts, despite state calls for self-quarantine. Facility staff are not wearing gloves or masks while working but were just approved by the state to use their own personal protective equipment.
- Mail and packages are not sterilized and sometimes not delivered.

Improper Medical Care

- Many designated medical beds are already full. People with chronic underlying conditions are denied treatment. Medical staff are not providing tests to people who show symptoms. One incarcerated person was given medical attention only when he started coughing up blood after reporting to his regular work shift.
- In some facilities, incarcerated people have received no official communication about the virus at all, gathering what they can from TV news instead. Inconsistent education practices abound: in some cases, people were asked to sign a liability waiver indicating they'd been educated on the virus; in others, no education is taking place at all.
- Food items are unavailable due to commissaries being closed or out of stock. One facility also does not have hot food. Lack of proper nutrition leads to compromised immune systems, expediting the spread of disease.
- There is no COVID-19 protocol for immunocompromised, elderly, or otherwise more vulnerable incarcerated people.
- Sick calls are being cancelled due to staffing shortages and high demand, limiting access to health care in an extremely essential time.

Unsafe Housing

- Many people with symptoms are being “monitored in place” while housed in large shared dormitories, with no partitions or space between beds, which ensures swift spread of the virus.

- Some units have been cleared for quarantine, with those rehoused packed on top of each other in new blocks.
- In some facilities, even those who are placed in quarantine are being housed with three other people.
- Even COs and State Police have complained to their unions about their own risk of exposure in these conditions, and are not getting responses.
- People with symptoms of COVID-19 are being transferred en masse from facilities where there are confirmed cases and housed with the general population in the new facility. Only recently did DOCCS suspend “non-essential” prison transfers.
- The same vehicles are used to transport quarantined individuals and healthy individuals; “all are crammed inside like sardines.”
- Residents of one unit reported verbal assaults by guards, inhumane treatment, and inadequate portions of food.

Inhumane Forced Labor Practices

- Incarcerated laborers are forced to report to work when sick. Labor continues in close-contact conditions to manufacture non-essential products like license plates and coffins.
- Incarcerated workers are tethered to their stations while manufacturing hand sanitizer, a product lauded by Governor Cuomo for distribution throughout the state.
- In many facilities, no masks or gloves are provided to incarcerated individuals, some of whom labor in food services and in other close-contact jobs. Some concerned individuals have resorted to covering their faces with scarves and turtlenecks due to lack of proper equipment.

Censorship & Denial of Community Support

- Others in the state have been prohibited from writing to prison administrators with their concerns. Many fear retaliation for speaking to media and the public about the deplorable conditions inside.
- Social visits, mental health treatment, religious services, recreation, and other programs have been eliminated.
- Funeral and deathbed visits are also suspended, ensuring that incarcerated people cannot see their families on the outside.
- Facilities fail to follow through on the promise to provide each incarcerated person with two free phone calls, five free stamps, and two free emails to compensate for canceled social visits. Phone and email kiosk access is arbitrarily limited to as little as 15 minutes per week, in some cases.
- JPay enforces arbitrary caps on the number of transactions per account, thereby limiting funds available for life-preserving supplies from the commissary. Few agents are available through customer service to unfreeze accounts.
- At least one entire facility is now under quarantine, with little to no instruction on how access to phones, showers, and kiosks.

Violations of Legal Rights

- Status quo conditions and reduced staff hours infringe on people's legal rights to consult with their lawyers and to access prison documentation. Legal calls are delayed or canceled and prison staff are unavailable to schedule legal visits.
- Parole interviews are being postponed with little notice of when they will resume.
- Prison staff refuse to release information to legal teams on the most basic conditions, such as the status of distribution of legal mail and packages.