COVID-19 in Connecticut Prisons and Jails: #FreeThemNowCT

As Connecticut continues to confront COVID-19, Governor Ned Lamont and state officials have failed to develop a comprehensive plan to tackle the crisis of the novel coronavirus in jails and prisons. As a result, COVID-19 continues to spread in correctional facilities in Connecticut – and deaths of incarcerated people continues to rise.

- Jails and prisons are notorious incubators of contagions due to close quarters and unsanitary conditions. This puts incarcerated people and Department of Correction (DOC) staff at heightened risk for COVID-19 – and jeopardizes community members outside of jails and prisons as well.

- As of June 24th 2020, nearly all the top-10 COVID-19 cluster sites in the U.S. are jails and prisons. This is one reason public health experts have called for decarceration to protect incarcerated people and communities outside of jail and prisons from COVID-19.\footnote{1}

- Yet Governor Lamont has failed to take comprehensive action to protect the lives of people incarcerated in jails and prisons. As of June 24, 2020, there were over 1,200 incarcerated people that have tested positive for COVID-19 in state prisons and jails.\footnote{2} The infection rate in state prisons and jails is 8 times higher than the infection rate for the general population in Connecticut.\footnote{3}

- In CT, incarcerated people who test positive for COVID-19 are kept in isolation, or sent to isolation in Northern Correctional Intuition. Prolonged periods of solitary confinement and isolation can cause severe psychological trauma, and Northern CI is classified as torture according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture.\footnote{4}

- Funding for medical care for incarcerated people in the DOC’s budget has declined steadily since 2008.\footnote{5} Since 2008, the DOC has been sued several times for medical negligence, which only highlights how unprepared the Department is to handle the virus.\footnote{6} In 2019, Tianna Laboy, who was detained in York Correction Institution, was forced to give birth in the toilet of her prison cell because the facility did not have a full-time OB/GYN on-site.\footnote{7}

To save lives and keep people safe, Connecticut needs a comprehensive COVID-19 care plan for people incarcerated in jail and prisons. Such a plan must:

- Implement an aggressive plan for emergency release of people from jails and prisons in Connecticut. Mike Lawlor, former chair of the Judiciary Community and the former Undersecretary for Criminal Justice for the state Office of Policy and Management, has noted how, from the start of the crisis until the start of June, the Department of Corrections “could safely reduce (the prison population)” by “4,000 and been that aggressive and not created any problems in the community.”\footnote{8}
Governor Lamont could enact such a plan immediately, but has failed to do so. In the absence of his leadership, the State Legislature should pass legislation to require the Governor to develop and implement such a plan.

It is time to free them now.

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9 Yale Medical, Public Health and Nursing Faculty, Letter on COVID in CT Prisons/Jails: (April 2020), available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1frn8ULlwtiBwv-oLaEasM8UyQNmxpP6qX7Yu1XYoMA/edit

* Id.