



**Durham CAN**  
(Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods)  
732 Ninth Street, #604, Durham, NC 27705  
(919) 627-1769 [www.DurhamCAN.org](http://www.DurhamCAN.org)

March 27, 2020

Satana Deberry  
District Attorney, Durham County

Dear Ms. Deberry,

As our community prepares for the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we at Durham CAN want to add our voice to the growing cry for help for one of our most vulnerable populations: our incarcerated brothers and sisters. As closed environments, jails and prisons present the highest risk of illness from a virus. Outbreaks in our detention and correctional facilities are inevitable. In explaining his stay-at-home order, Mayor Schewel declared that the window for keeping ourselves safe is now. Similarly, the window for releasing our community members from prisons to spare them, and other incarcerated people and the staff that secure them, from this dangerous disease is now.

We have observed and commend you for your March 20, 2020, press release announcing your office's effort to reduce the population of the Durham County Detention Facility in light of COVID-19. We also commend you for signing the March 2020 letter published by Fair and Just Prosecution that acknowledged that your responsibility for our community's safety extends behind prison walls. As of this writing, 817 of our brothers and sisters are in the Division of Adult Corrections. That is the number of men and women serving prison sentences for crimes committed in Durham county. That is the number of our community members sitting in a facility that will eventually be ravaged by COVID-19.

In a different time, under normal circumstances, it would undoubtedly be your responsibility to carefully consider the specifics of the crimes and the characteristics of the offenders before providing sentencing relief. We are not living in normal circumstances. Our world faces a pandemic. As Mayor Schewel demonstrated, bold and broad actions are required now. As the nation's incarcerated population gets proportionally older, a conscious result of severe sentencing practices in recent decades, releasing a handful of people who are elderly and near the end of their sentences will not suffice. We are asking that you seriously consider broad sentencing relief for a significant portion of our 817 brothers and sisters. Criteria could include, but not be limited to, individuals who are 65 or older, individuals who have served 3/4 of their sentence, or individuals serving sentences for low-level felonies or probation/post-release supervision violations. We are aware of at least one person who fits all three criteria: Linwood McDonald, 66 years old and serving time for drug offenses. Allowing Mr. McDonald and other people who fit one of the above criteria to return to their families is consistent with your duty to keep our community safe. We, Durham CAN, are your community. We want our brothers and sisters safe and sound. At home.

Sincerely,

Durham Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods