

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, September 17th, 2020

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Oregon Health Professionals Call on Department of Corrections to Focus on Public Health after COVID-19 Outbreaks and Inhumane Fire Evacuations

[PORTLAND, OR] - Today, health professionals and public health advocates with Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility issued a plea to Governor Kate Brown and the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) to prioritize public health in state prisons and to work collaboratively with health experts to avoid continued loss of life and dignity in Oregon prisons. The call comes after six suspected COVID-19 deaths, outbreaks in nine Oregon prisons and inhumane conditions experienced by adults in custody who were evacuated due to fast-spreading wildfires.

Dr. Ann Turner of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility said:

“The UN High Commission on Human Rights states that ‘**All prisoners shall be treated with the respect due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings.**’ Judging from the Oregon Department of Corrections’ handling of the COVID-19 outbreaks and the inhumane and unsafe evacuations during these fires, I think it is safe to say that ODOC has violated the basic principle of human dignity and endangered not only the health of those in prison but that of the surrounding communities. Overcrowded Oregon prisons are settings that demand excellent public health practices and systems--all the time--but especially in this unprecedented time of two public health emergencies: COVID-19 and wildfires. We would all benefit from the public health community, the prisoner advocate community and ODOC working together to implement respectful and safe public health practices to ensure humane care to the people in our prisons.”

Due to Governor Brown only releasing 57 inmates to limit the spread of COVID-19 in state prisons, ODOC was left with no wiggle room when needing to move prisoners from facilities threatened by fast-moving fires. The resulting impacts of prisoners being put in close quarters with one another could lead to additional COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths in the coming weeks. Already, [OPB reports](#) that at least two evacuated inmates have since tested positive for COVID-19.

“Even in an emergency, especially in an emergency, the state has a responsibility to care for the people it is holding in custody,” Dr. Turner continued. “We must reduce the prison population immediately and take careful precautions to improve conditions and evacuation plans so that we avert additional crises. We must not allow for a situation like the mass COVID-19 outbreak at [San Quentin State Prison](#) in California to occur in Oregon.”

With limited exceptions, Governor Kate Brown is the only state leader who has the power to release people in order to protect the health and wellbeing of all who live and work in our prisons or live in communities near prisons. She must act urgently to commute far more sentences than she has done to date. Lives depend on it.

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