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“The People’s Briefing” Demands Governor Cuomo Take Immediate Steps to Address Public Health Crisis Unfolding in State’s Jails, Prisons and Detention Centers

In Contrast to Governor’s Briefings, Advocates Provided Detailed Updates on The COVID-19 Crisis that Is Unfolding for New Yorkers Behind Bars

NEW YORK -- Today, the [Justice Roadmap](#) -- a coalition of immigration and criminal justice advocates fighting to reverse the long history of criminalization of Black and Brown New Yorkers -- held “The People’s Briefing” to report on the pandemic behind bars in New York State. They cited the glaring omission from the Governor’s daily press briefings of updates or action related to New Yorkers incarcerated in jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers, and immigration detention in the state. In addition to providing detailed reports, advocates shared [urgent demands and a petition to Governor Cuomo](#) calling for immediate action to save lives.

Advocates demanded that Governor Cuomo change his extremely narrow criteria for release in order to reduce the number of New Yorkers behind bars immediately. Advocates also demanded that incarcerated people be paid minimum wage for all labor including the production of hand sanitizer for the state, that solitary confinement be ended, and that phone calls and emails be fully available to all people incarcerated and free of charge so people can be in touch with their check in on loved ones.

[View the full press conference here.](#)

Panelists from Brooklyn Defender Services, Brooklyn Community Bail Fund, Center for Community Alternatives, Community Connections for Youth, Correctional Association of New York, Release Aging People from Prison, Fines and Fees Justice Center, Justice for Migrant Families WNY, Legal Aid Society, New Hour for Women and Children - Long Island, and Worth Rises described the horrible and tragic situation unfolding in prisons, jails, immigration detention centers, youth prisons, and women’s prisons.

Advocates shared dispatches from people behind bars across New York State who described:

In Prisons

- Coughing from cells all around, with hundreds of people likely not accounted for in official coronavirus case numbers provided by the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.
- People with fevers over 100 degrees left in common living areas for days before being transferred to medical areas.
- Officers, who were recently provided with masks, deliberately walking around without personal protective equipment, even removing their masks and flaunting them.

- People in solitary confinement at their wits' end, particularly with family visits prohibited, restrictions on packages, and the overall anxiety and fear of the virus while being cut off from meaningful human engagement.
- At women's prisons, women, including mothers with babies in the prison nursery and pregnant women, have not been given protective supplies except for a single state-issued handkerchief that will not be replaced if soiled, issued just this week.
- While New York's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) reports that 165 incarcerated people and 293 staff have tested positive for COVID-19, and that 5 incarcerated people with the virus have died, incarcerated people and advocates believe the numbers are far higher.

In Jails

- People denied access to protective equipment, cleaning supplies and basic hygiene items like soap, masks and gloves.
- Interruptions in prescription medication, including asthma inhalers. Limited access to non Covid-19 related medical and mental health care.
- Sick call moved to a "triage phone line" staffed by nurses, but people in custody report unanswered nurse phone lines, without any way to leave a message.
- Several people reported not receiving their asthma inhalers. Failure by DOC to properly quarantine housing areas and no ability for individuals to practice social distancing.
- In New York City, official reports show that 334 incarcerated people and 657 Department of Corrections staff have been diagnosed with COVID-19 as of April 15.

In Immigration Detention

- Immigrants detained at Orange County Jail in Goshen, NY reported having no access to personal protective equipment.
- Collective spaces like gym space, phones, and showers are not regularly sanitized.
- Even for the few people who have been granted bond, it's common for ICE has to require payment of bonds as high as up to \$25,000 or even \$50,000, limiting any access to release.
- At the Buffalo Detention Facility in Batavia, New York, there were 11 confirmed COVID-19 cases, but this is likely an undercount.

Youth Prisons

- In New York City, Horizon Juvenile Center has been designated the "sick" facility for young people diagnosed with COVID-19. 10 children are currently incarcerated there.
- Schooling and programs have been suspended in youth prisons with negative impact on the mental and psychological well-being of children.
- Parents are not receiving updates on their children in youth prisons and do not have sufficient access to communication now that in-person visits have been suspended.
- Advocates noted that the "secure" youth detention centers -- complete with bars and armed guards -- could easily be completely shut down, citing alternative non-secure detention centers.

Fines & Fees

- Advocates decried arrests, warrants, driver's license suspensions, and parole or probation violations for not paying fines and fees.
- For those who are incarcerated, fees such as money transfer fees made it impossible to afford basic health and hygiene supplies like soap, further exacerbated by the practice of garnishing commissary accounts to pay fines and fees.

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[The Justice Roadmap](#): We are criminal justice and immigration advocates, directly impacted people, legal service providers, and faith leaders who stand united in the belief that this is a critical moment in our country's history, one that requires moral clarity and bold action by our state's leaders: New York must act to ensure the basic human dignity and core constitutional and human rights of all New Yorkers.

