

PRESS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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See Zoom press conference recording beginning at 29:00 here: shorturl.at/amGIT

Family Members of Incarcerated New Yorkers and Advocates Host Virtual Press Conference to Announce COVID-19 Community Demands for People in New York State Prisons

New York – March 30, 2020 – Today, family members of New Yorkers in state prison, criminal justice advocates, legislators, and public health experts held a virtual press conference to announce and present their [COVID-19 Community Demands for People in New York State Prisons](#). With strong feelings of urgency and desperation, loved ones of those in prison called on Governor Cuomo to use his executive clemency power to immediately release older people and others in prison who are vulnerable to the virus.

The group also called on the State Board of Parole to release similarly vulnerable people from prison, and to expedite parole interviews for parole-eligible people who are vulnerable to the virus. They also called for free prison communication that keeps families connected; equitable compensation for incarcerated peoples' prison labor; and health and medical practices and procedures that align with community, public health standards, including an end to prison-wide lockdowns and solitary confinement.

Just hours before the press conference began, advocates and attorneys heard from multiple sources that an incarcerated person at Sing Sing Correctional Facility died after being placed in isolation after exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms. If the death was in fact caused by the virus, it would represent the first COVID-19 death of an incarcerated person in the New York State prison system. The person was 58 years-old. State prison officials have not yet confirmed whether or not the man tested positive for COVID-19. Advocates aren't releasing the person's name out respect for him and his family but called on the governor to take action before more deaths occur.

New Paltz resident Michelle Lind, whose currently incarcerated husband is 73 years old and has cancer said, "My husband's clemency application has been sitting on Governor Cuomo's desk since 2016. Cuomo, what are you waiting for? My cry is: Let them go. Freedom."

New York City resident Theresa Grady, whose currently incarcerated husband is 65 years old with serious health conditions said, "My husband doesn't want to go to medical or go get food in prison because people aren't wearing masks or protected. The Correctional Officers aren't protected. Governor Cuomo, let them go. If you don't, you will have a lot of deaths on your hands."

Jose Saldana, Director of the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, who spent 38 years in prison said, “Our questions to Governor Cuomo is: Of the roughly 45,000 incarcerated people in New York State prisons, the thousands of older incarcerated people and people with compromised immune systems, are their lives of value? Are they human beings? Or will you dismiss them and sentence them to death?”

Long Island resident Lavonia Scaggs, whose daughter is incarcerated in New York State prison said, “My daughter has asthma and is vulnerable to dying from the Coronavirus, which would leave me to care for her five children. She told me she is afraid and people are crying because they are uninformed. She tells me, ‘I see nurses and guards coming and going without PPE.’”

State Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa (AD-72) said, “Some of us have the privilege of being able to worry about COVID-19 from the safety of our offices and homes. But family members of people languishing in prison do not have that privilege. I have constituents asking us to check in with their family members because they can’t. We’re calling on Governor Cuomo to grant clemency.”

New York City resident Amanda Lugo, whose father is currently incarcerated said, “My dad is scheduled to be released in 6 weeks. He's 53. He's working so hard, going to school, and taking classes to get out as fast as he can. Now all this uncertainty is happening and it's really scary. I just want him to come home. I just want him to be safe.”

New York City resident Kharon Benson, whose father is currently incarcerated said, “My father was granted parole and had a set date to come out in 2017 until his parole decision was reversed. He is still fighting to come home. A decision on his appeal was scheduled for last week. And now because of COVID-19, it’s been pushed back.”

New York City Board of Correction Commissioner Dr. Robert Cohen said, “No one should die in prison. Incarcerated people cannot protect themselves right now. Only Governor Cuomo can protect them.”

Buffalo resident Donna Robinson, Western New York Community Organizer with the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, whose daughter is currently incarcerated said, “I’ve been asking Governor Cuomo to act. I’ve gone to the Capitol building a million times. I’ve asked him so many times to hear my cry. And yet he says this is not an issue. What he is doing to our loved ones behind bars is a paradigm of perpetual punishment.”

BACKGROUND: As of March 30, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) has officially confirmed that 14 incarcerated people and 79 DOCCS staff members in 10 prisons across New York State have tested positive for COVID-19. Reports from people in prison indicate that COVID-19 is invading even more facilities and impacting more people than the state is reporting. To date, DOCCS has implemented the following measures in the wake of the virus: forcing incarcerated people at Great Meadow Correctional Facility to produce the state’s

hand sanitizer; canceling all in-person prison visits except for non-contact legal visits; providing diluted bleach for the purposes of cleaning and sanitizing to incarcerated people in select facilities; and providing limited educational materials about the facts associated with COVID-19.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Governor Cuomo has said in two separate press briefings that he is considering granting clemencies to elderly people and others in state prison who are vulnerable to the virus. On March 27, he announced that he would release up to 1,100 New Yorkers detained in local jails for violating parole but has not publicly stated any specific plans to release any of the 43,800 people incarcerated in the 52 state prisons across New York. There are 10,239 older adults (aged 50 and older) incarcerated in New York State prisons.

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Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP Campaign

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