MEDIA ADVISORY
Contact: Dave George, ddgeorge23@gmail.com, 631-885-3565

Ahead of NY State Legislative Hearing on COVID-19’s Impact on Communities of Color, Community Leaders of Color Hold Virtual Press Conference on the Racism
The Group Will Highlight New Data Showing People of Color Account for 81% of NY Prison Deaths Since Outbreak of COVID and Demand Action

WHEN: Monday, May 18, 9am
WHERE: Zoom: Register here

WHO: Community leaders of color, including formerly incarcerated people, family members of people in prison, public health experts, and representatives from the Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, Citizen Action of New York, Center for Community Alternatives, New Hour for Women and Children, VOCAL-NY, #HALTsolitary Campaign, Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club, Center on Race Inequality and the Law at NYU Law, Albany Social Justice Center, Capital Area Against Mass Incarceration, and New York State Prisoner Justice Network.

WHAT: Community leaders of color will host a virtual press conference ahead of the legislative hearing on COVID-19’s impact on communities of color to uplift the racially disparate harm that COVID-19 is inflicting on New Yorkers of Color in state prisons. The group will uplift new data that shows the large majority of New Yorkers who have died in prison custody amidst the COVID pandemic were People of Color. The group will demand the legislature reconvene their legislative session to pass emergency legislation to prevent further, racially disparate harm amongst incarcerated people, including Elder Parole (S.2144/A.9040), Fair and Timely Parole (S.497A/A.4346A), and the HALT Solitary Confinement Act (S.1623/A.2500). They’ll also continue their calls for Governor Cuomo to grant mass clemencies to incarcerated New Yorkers, especially older people and those who are medically vulnerable.

Background: Vast racial disparities in deaths incarcerated New Yorkers continue a longstanding “scourge of racial bias” in New York State prisons -- from violent interpersonal racism by staff to the use of solitary confinement to parole release determinations. On March 30, Juan Mosquero, a Latinx person, died of COVID-19 at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. He was the first incarcerated person in the New York State prison system to die from the virus. Since Mr. Mosquero’s death, data obtained through a New York State FOIL request shows that over 81% of all incarcerated people who have died are People of Color--59% of whom were Black New Yorkers despite the fact that Black people make up roughly 14% of the overall state population. The data came from the New York State Commission on Correction in response to a FOIL request, and includes the 15 incarcerated people confirmed by DOCCS to have died due to COVID in the period from March 30 to May 5, as well as 12 additional people for whom the cause of death has not
been confirmed. (At least one person has died of COVID since then). For months, advocates have called into question DOCCS’ tracking and reporting of COVID deaths and infection rates.

In addition:

- The rate at which people have died in NY prisons is 3.24 times higher since March 30 than for the first three months of the year.
- 78% of people who died since March 30 were older adults--aged 55 and older (compared to 40% in 2020 prior to this date).
- The median age of those who have died since March 30 is 62 years old (compared to a median age of 52 years prior to this date).
- 1 in 5 people who died since March 30 were over age 75 and 44% were over age 65 (compared to 0% over 75 and 25% over 65 prior to this date).
- The oldest person who died was 85 years old.
- DOCCS has reported that 16 people have died of COVID-19 in eight prisons since March 30. Those eight prisons accounted for 18 of all deaths between March 30 and May 5; by contrast only 3 people died in these prisons during the first three months of 2020.
- Rather than releasing vulnerable people, the state’s primary response has been to lock people in solitary confinement. In fact, health experts warn that solitary worsens the spread and impacts of COVID-19 by weakening people’s overall condition and immunity, by forcing contact between officers and the people in solitary they have to escort to showers or recreation in accordance with DOCCS rules, and by discouraging people from reporting symptoms because they know they may likely end up in a SHU cell rather than receiving quality medical treatment.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, at least 15 state prison systems and the federal prison system have recognized that preventing massive suffering and death behind bars necessitates significant reductions in prison populations, and have reduced their incarcerated populations by more than one percent. Governors and state prison systems in Kentucky, California, Wisconsin, Utah, Maine, and Vermont, have all reduced their prison populations by more than at least four percent. New York State prisons have more COVID cases, and higher rates of COVID, than all six of these states that have taken more action. New York State prisons have a high rate of infection despite only testing less than two percent of incarcerated people.

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