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Advocates Slam Gov. Cuomo for Forcing Incarcerated People to Make Hundreds of Thousands of Protective Masks They Can't Wear, Call on Cuomo to Grant Broad Clemency and Take Other COVID Actions

(New York, NY) -- Today, Worth Rises, Color of Change, the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, #HALTsolitary Campaign, VOCAL-NY, and Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club released the following statement in response to a [report in *Mother Jones*](#) that incarcerated people in New York State prisons are making hundreds of thousands of face masks - for pennies on the dollar - and are prevented by DOCCS from wearing the masks themselves to protect against contracting COVID-19:

"It is outrageous that Governor Cuomo is forcing incarcerated New Yorkers - disproportionately Black and Brown - to make hundreds of thousands of essential face masks, while simultaneously preventing those same New Yorkers from wearing the masks themselves to protect against contracting COVID-19. Adding to their callous and inhumane policy, Governor Cuomo and DOCCS are paying incarcerated New Yorkers just pennies an hour to manufacture this essential PPE in settings that are known breeding grounds for contagious disease.

Outside of these PPE factories, Governor Cuomo and DOCCS only allow incarcerated New Yorkers to use make-shift face masks made out of small, paper-thin handkerchiefs that are wholly inadequate to protect against infection.

We've seen this story before. First it was hand sanitizer, and now it's medical face masks.

This is yet another example of the Governor's complete disregard for the lives and wellbeing of incarcerated New Yorkers. If the Governor sees incarcerated people at state prisons as full human beings, then he must take every precaution to protect their health and safety.

For as long the pandemic persists, every single incarcerated person must have the face masks they need as well as other critical PPE. DOCCS must also rapidly increase testing for all incarcerated New Yorkers for COVID-19. Furthermore, incarcerated people must be fairly compensated for their labor that benefits all of us.

Above all else, the Governor needs to grant broad clemencies to New Yorkers in prison to stop the spread of this virus. If the Governor fails to act, incarcerated New Yorkers - the vulnerable, infirm, and aging - will needlessly lose their lives because of his failure to do what is right."

Background: In March 2020, Governor Cuomo announced that incarcerated people would produce hundreds of thousands of units of state-issued hand sanitizer for all New Yorkers to use amidst COVID-19, except New Yorkers behind bars. For weeks, incarcerated people were prohibited from using the essential cleaning product that they made for pennies an hour. Instead, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) most commonly

gave incarcerated people diluted bleach to clean themselves and their belongings. In April 2020, Governor Cuomo and DOCCS finally began allowing incarcerated people to use the hand sanitizer. Reports from many incarcerated people indicate that the hand sanitizer remains inaccessible to people in many prisons throughout the state.

As of May 5, 407 incarcerated people and 1,129 staff in New York's prisons have tested positive for COVID-19. Thirteen incarcerated people and 4 prison staff have died from the virus. DOCCS has only tested 1% of incarcerated people. Despite calls from [advocates](#), [attorneys](#), [family members of people in prison](#), [public health experts](#), [members of Congress](#), [district attorneys and philanthropists](#), and [high profile celebrities](#) for the state to release large numbers of people from prison in response to the virus, the Governor has yet to issue a single clemency since the pandemic began. Governors in California, Illinois, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Washington have issued hundreds and thousands of clemencies to mitigate the harm of the virus in their state prison systems.

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