

****PRESS RELEASE****

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 19th, 2020

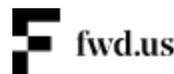
Contact: Katie Schaffer, kschaffer@communityalternatives.org, 646-265-2044

With NYS Lawmakers Ignoring Crisis of COVID-19 Behind Bars, Advocates Held a “People’s Hearing” on the Impacts of the Pandemic in Prisons & Jails

Formerly Incarcerated People, People with Loved Ones Inside, Public Health Officials, and Other Advocates Demanded Clemencies and Passage of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, Elder Parole, and Fair and Timely Parole



NEW YORK -- Today, formerly incarcerated leaders held a “People’s Hearing” on COVID-19 in prisons and jails with testimony by family members with loved ones behind bars, people who have survived incarceration, public health experts and jails officials. People who testified denounced the failures of Governor Cuomo and the New York Legislature to address the ongoing crisis of COVID behind bars, and demanded passage of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, Elder Parole, Fair and Timely Parole, and other urgent measures. The hearing



was organized by Center for Community Alternatives, #HALTsolitary Campaign, Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) Campaign, Parole Preparation Project and FWD.us.

[View the full People’s Hearing recording here.](#)

Testimony was provided by Cynthia Carter-Young whose brother, Leonard Carter, passed away from COVID-19 while behind bars; Robert Cohen, an expert in prison healthcare, Margaret Egan, a member and representative of the NYC Board of Corrections; Serena Liguori, the formerly incarcerated Executive Director of New Hour for Women and Children - Long Island; Stefen R. Short, a Prisoner’s Rights attorney at the Legal Aid Society; Jolene Russ, a New Yorker whose husband is currently incarcerated in a New York State prison among dozens of other impacted people, families and advocates.

“We are deeply disturbed that the New York State Senate and Assembly continue to ignore the crisis unfolding behind bars amid the COVID-19 pandemic,” **said Marvin Mayfield, Statewide Organizer at Center for Community Alternatives.** “The legislature is currently holding hearings on a variety of critically important topics related to COVID-19, including nursing homes, higher education, and hospitals, yet they have thus far refused to hold one on prisons and jails, turning a cold shoulder to the approximately more than 48,000 people incarcerated New Yorkers. These facilities were dangerous and deadly before this pandemic, and are only more so now -- all with sharply disproportionate impacts on Black people and other people of color. Because the legislature refuses to conduct its own hearing or pass legislation to address the harms of COVID-19 behind bars, we are holding today’s People’s Hearing on this urgent topic.”

Speakers expressed dismay that New York State has offered little to no transparency on conditions behind bars throughout the crisis, released only a small fraction of elder and immunocompromised people, and used widespread and extremely dangerous solitary confinement in lieu of medically-sound quarantine protocols, leaving incarcerated people extremely vulnerable as the virus spreads. In addition to reporting on conditions, speakers demanded action by the Governor and the New York State legislature.

“I ask for the release of all pregnant women who are incarcerated in New York State, all women, and all people. I gave birth to twins during my 12 years to life prison sentence,” **said Sammie Werkheiser, a formerly incarcerated advocate with A Little Piece of Light.** “I believe that especially during the pandemic, women are in need of adequate healthcare and nutrition and can get that best at home. My son Julius survived incarceration in utero, but his twin sister Jacinta died 22 minutes after birth.”

This call for release was echoed by **Jolene Russ, whose husband is currently incarcerated, who said,** “When it was realized that there is no way to social distance in prison, we thought release efforts, mass clemencies, were the reasonable common-sense next step. After all we are talking about safety and wellbeing. While some were released, it had no real effect on density. In order for that to happen we need to be talking about a BOLD release effort that decarcerates.”



CENTER FOR
COMMUNITY
ALTERNATIVES



HALTsolitary
NEW YORK CAMPAIGN FOR ALTERNATIVES TO ISOLATED CONFINEMENT



fwd.us

PAROLE
PREPARATION
PROJECT
A PROJECT OF THE NATIONAL LAWYERS GUILD
NEW YORK CITY CHAPTER



Calling for action to decarcerate prisons and jails across the state, **Dr. Bobby Cohen, prison health expert said**, “Prisons and Jails in New York State don't function benevolently. They do not serve the interests of incarcerated persons and their families. 17 incarcerated persons, 4 parolees, and 5 staff have died so far. Thousands have become infected, and if immediate action is not taken, thousands more will become infected, and more will die. No one should die in prison.” Dr. Cohen also denounced the widespread use of solitary confinement: “solitary causes severe damage and causes psychosis. It is terrible for everyone. It is the cruelest thing that we do. During COVID, solitary also prevents people from identifying their symptoms from fear of being placed in a solitary confinement environment.”

Echoing the call for decarceration, **Margaret Egan, member of the New York City Board of Corrections explained**, “We believe this significant decrease in the population has greatly reduced the impact of COVID-19 on the New York City jails. Sustaining this low jail population will also be critical in managing a potential second wave.”

[Written testimony from the speakers can be found here.](#)

###