

“To combat COVID-19 in Upstate, address the crisis in prisons and jails”

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by Demond Meeks (NYS Assembly Member for 137th District, Rochester)

Last December, I was arrested in my district. I was defending my constituents’ rights to housing during one of the coldest months of the pandemic. It was a shocking yet unsurprising reminder of how the carceral system sees me and countless other Black and Brown people.

From arrest to post-conviction, the carceral system makes clear its punitive intent, and far too many people across the state fall victim to its wrath. The COVID-19 pandemic is making this all the more clear.

COVID-19 thrives in crowded spaces, lingers in the air, and spreads like a wildfire in congregate settings. Despite the facts and science being clear, New York has failed to protect one of the most vulnerable groups: people behind bars.

Jails and prisons are the perfect environment for a pandemic to wreak havoc. Cramped, crowded, and lacking quality health care, they are a breeding ground for a full-blown viral outbreak. This issue is not only a Downstate problem, it’s happening right here Upstate.

From Albion and Clinton to Cayuga Correctional Facility, Upstate New York’s prisons have been a national COVID-19 hotspot for outbreaks. At one point in October, [nearly 40% of the incarcerated population](#) at the Elmira Correctional Facility tested positive for COVID. I had a chance to visit Orleans Correctional Facility and saw firsthand how the crisis is worsening. With vaccine rollouts underway, we must prioritize our incarcerated population because stopping the spread behind bars will benefit us all.

A COVID-19 outbreak behind bars is not restricted to incarcerated people. Correctional officers, nurses, staff, and countless others who travel to these facilities daily risk spreading the virus throughout their communities. When an outbreak occurred at Greene Correctional Facility, 100 incarcerated people and 14 staffers were infected. [Reporting showed](#) a direct link between the outbreak and surrounding communities, including Greenville Elementary School and assisted living facilities.

Vaccinations alone though are not the answer. It’s critical that we pass long term solutions to stop future outbreaks. That’s why I support the People’s Campaign for Parole Justice.

The Campaign is a grassroots, statewide effort to address parole abuses by advocating for common sense legislation that would reunite families, promote safety, and save money.

The [Elder Parole bill](#) is a fair, humane, evidence-based reform that would allow the State Board of Parole to conduct an evaluation for potential release to parole supervision for incarcerated people aged 55 and older who have already served long prison sentences. New York spends hundreds of millions of our taxpayer dollars incarcerating elders, one of the populations most vulnerable to COVID-19, who also have the lowest recidivism rates. Equally important, the [Fair and Timely Parole bill](#) would provide more meaningful parole hearings for incarcerated people

who are already parole-eligible, basing decisions on who they are today. Both bills will lead to decarceration and a reduction in the spread of COVID-19.

As a newly elected Assembly Member, I am determined to advance policies that benefit the communities I swore to serve. Criminal justice reform is key to building healthier and safer communities. COVID-19 exacerbated the health disparities among our most vulnerable neighbors, with incarcerated individuals being no exception. Until we end the outbreak behind bars, we will continue to fuel the outbreak in Upstate New York.

Assembly Member Demond Meeks represents the 137th District and lives in Rochester.