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## **Coalition Holds Media Briefing on COVID-19 in NY State Prisons**

### **The Group Outlined What Gov. Cuomo Has and Hasn't Done to Protect the Lives of New Yorkers in Prison During the Pandemic and Called for Broad Clemencies and Other COVID Related Actions**

**New York -- May 5, 2020 --** A coalition of legislators, health experts, advocates, and community leaders directly impacted by New York's criminal legal system held a media briefing on the state of New York State prisons and releases amid the COVID-19 pandemic. [Full zoom recording of the briefing here](#). The briefing featured Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa (AD-72), Dr. Robert Cohen, and attorneys and advocates from the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, and [FWD.us](http://FWD.us).

The group gave a comprehensive overview of the harm COVID-19 is causing to New Yorkers incarcerated in the state's 52 prisons. They also broke down the facts and myths surrounding Governor Cuomo's limited plans to release incarcerated New Yorkers who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. They outlined their community demands for New Yorkers incarcerated in NYS prisons, focusing specifically on their demands of Gov. Cuomo to grant broad clemency to incarcerated people, especially those most vulnerable to the virus, and to test all incarcerated people. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Governor has released less than one percent of people in his state prisons. His prison system has also tested only one percent of the incarcerated population.

The group provided [briefing materials](#) and [their full set of demands](#) for release, clemency expansion, reentry, community supervision, and improving conditions in prisons.

**Assembly Member Carmen De La Rosa (AD-72), who represents parts of Upper Manhattan said,** "We as legislators cannot stand by while people we love and our community members die in prison. The number of people that have been released is far too small. 46 of my colleagues and I have said to Gov. Cuomo that we want to see more. Many of us were pushing for this even before COVID hit. Now that the pandemic hit, this has turned from a desperate plea, to a humanitarian plea. It's a life or death situation. We need action right now. No one deserves to die in prison. We can't be a state that opposes the death penalty but sentences people to die in prison."

**Donna Robinson, Western New York Regional Organizer with the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, whose daughter is serving a life sentence in New York State said,** "I'm feeling like all of my biggest fears have come to fruition. Everything that I've thought about in my worst nightmares is happening. The women incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility didn't go there to die. My daughter is one of them. She was sentenced to 15 years - life, not 15 years to death."

**Dr. Robert Cohen, corrections health expert and Commissioner with the New York City**

**Board of Correction said,** “There is a fundamental public health approach to COVID-19 in confined spaces like New York State’s prisons and that is to get as many people out as quickly as possible. Time is not on anyone’s side. There are 12 deaths now, but COVID-19 coming up and spreading through the state, and New York is doing very little to prevent the spread. Time is running out.”

**Anthony Dixon, Director of Community Engagement with the Parole Preparation Project, who served 32 years in New York State prisons said,** “How can you practice social distancing in a dorm setting, or on a cellblock, within inches of one another? It’s an impossibility. The Governor says to us that every life matters, and that he is going to do everything he can to save lives. Yet, when you look at the prison institutions that he is in charge of, he is doing the least.”

**Michelle Lewin, attorney and Executive Director of the Parole Preparation Project said,** “Public health experts across the country have been clear that the only way to stop the spread of the virus in prisons is to release people. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we’ve been calling on Governor Cuomo to release people. Since Friday, May 1, only 114 people have been released. The Governor has granted zero clemencies. It’s not enough.”

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