

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Hundreds of People from Across New York State Hold Virtual Advocacy Day to Demand the New York Senate and Assembly Pass the HALT Solitary Confinement Act and Elder Parole as Part of the Legislature's Response to COVID-19

Speakers Will Demand New York End Solitary and Release People to Save Lives, End Suffering, and Stop the Spread of COVID, Highlighting [New Data](#) Showing High Rates of Suicide and Suicide Attempts in Solitary and [New Data](#) Showing People of Color Account for 81% of All NY Prison Deaths Since Outbreak of COVID

WHEN: Wednesday, May 27, 10 am

WHERE: Zoom [here](#).

WHO: Formerly incarcerated people, family members of people in prison, and members of the Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) Campaign, #HALTsolitary Campaign, Coalition for Women Prisoners, Parole Preparation Project, Citizen Action of New York, New Hour for Women and Children, VOCAL-NY, National Alliance on Mental Illness, JustLeadershipUSA, New York Civil Liberties Union, Empire State Indivisible, Beacon Prison Action, Uri L'Tzedek, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Interfaith Impact of NYS, Life Progressive Services Westchester, New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, and more

WHAT: Community leaders and advocates will host a virtual press conference as part of a statewide virtual advocacy day to demand the New York State Legislature pass the HALT Solitary Confinement Act and Elder Parole to save lives, reduce suffering, and slow the spread of COVID-19.

BACKGROUND: New York State has thus far failed in its response to COVID-19 in its prisons. Health experts have urged mass releases of thousands of people, an end to solitary confinement, and the provision of adequate medical care and hospital access. Yet, Governor Cuomo has issued zero clemencies and has only released less than one percent of people using other, narrow mechanisms with sweeping categorical exclusions that leave behind the large majority of incarcerated people vulnerable to COVID-19. Instead, the state's primary response has been to lock people in solitary confinement and lockdown entire units with no programming or visits. In fact, health experts warn that [solitary worsens the spread and impacts of COVID-19](#) by weakening people's overall condition and immunity, forcing contact between officers and the people in solitary they escort to showers or recreation, and discouraging people from reporting symptoms because they know they may likely end up in a solitary cell rather than receiving quality medical treatment.

The results have already been tragic. COVID has spread to nearly half of the state prisons, nearly 1,800 staff and incarcerated people are confirmed to have been infected (and likely much higher numbers because of a dearth of testing among incarcerated people), 16 incarcerated people and 4 staff have been confirmed to have died from COVID, there has been a surge in overall deaths of incarcerated people beyond those 16, and of all the people who died since the COVID outbreak, 81% are People of Color. Given how prisons have been described as petri dishes for the virus, and given the state's failed response to date, there remains a fear that - like in nursing homes - the virus will continue to spread, and more and more people will be infected and die. Moreover, the rise in deaths and the vast racial disparities in deaths of 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. They also come in the midst of a [surge](#) in suicide and self-harm in New York State prisons, with solitary confinement as a primary driver.

While the Governor has failed, the legislature must meaningfully address mass incarceration as part of its response to COVID-19, and must address it in a meaningful way that follows the recommendations of health experts and will actually get thousands of people out of prison and ensure that those who remain are not subjected to torture or death. The HALT Solitary Confinement Act, Elder Parole, and Fair and Timely Parole are the community-driven solutions that will actually work and the legislature must pass them immediately.

[Elder Parole](#) would allow the State Board of Parole to provide an evaluation for potential parole release to incarcerated people aged 55 and older who have already served 15 or more years, including some of the state's oldest and sickest incarcerated people. [Fair and Timely Parole](#) would provide more meaningful parole reviews for incarcerated people who are already parole eligible. The [Humane Alternatives to Long-Term \(HALT\) Solitary Confinement Act](#) would end the torture of prolonged solitary confinement and replace it with more humane and effective alternatives while still allowing for true medical isolation as needed. The bill has more official legislative co-sponsors than the number of the votes needed to pass, and has been awaiting a full floor vote for more than a year. These measures would not only prevent COVID-19 from creating a disaster in the prisons, but would also begin to reverse some of the damaging policies that have created mass incarceration and death by incarceration.

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