April 18, 2020

Dear Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio,

We are pleased that the Governor has announced that incarcerated people in DOCS facilities over the age of 55, having 90 days or less on their sentence, and not guilty of a violent or sexual related crime will be released on a rolling basis. Believing there are a little over 200 people eligible, out of that number, just how many are women? We are also pleased that the Mayor is reducing the population at Rikers and as we support your combined efforts, please recognize there is much more to do!

As women, mothers, academics, religious and non-profit leaders, health care providers and formerly incarcerated advocates; we recognize the imminent danger facing incarcerated women and mothers during the current COVID-19 pandemic. We, as a collective, have formed the Justice for Women COVID-19 Task Force as a statewide response to urge the protection of women behind bars during this unprecedented pandemic. Our mission is to uphold and protect the inherent dignity, value and human rights of incarcerated women in New York State.

While we call for responsive intervention for all incarcerated people, we urge an immediate and gender-specific response be taken to prevent illness and potential death(s) of pregnant women, older people, the medically vulnerable and all women, girls, intersex, gender non-conforming and trans persons in New York State prisons, county and NYC jails. As of December of 2019, there were approximately 1,961 women in New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) custody. These numbers do not reflect the many women detained in county jails. Three quarters of the women behind bars are mothers, many with babies in prison nurseries, as well as 170 women housed in Rose M. Singer in custody at the New York City Department of Correction (DOC). Women and mothers are often the primary caretakers of their families so we urge you to release mothers so they can return home to their children.

We are equally concerned for the welfare of correctional officers, and other prison and jail staff. We call on DOCCS and the NYC Department of Correction (DOC) to take every precaution and preventive measure to protect everyone and immediately halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In addition, we urge DOCCS and DOC to provide education and ongoing updates to the prison and jail population and their families. To do so, we call on Governor Cuomo, DOCCS and DOC to:

- Immediately release anyone at high risk for infection, including those who are older, pregnant, those with underlying health conditions, and mothers with babies in the prison nurseries. We recognize the high risk of infection posed by keeping babies and mothers in prison and urge their joint release as a family prioritized.
- Release not only those convicted of non-violent offenses, but older people since research by leading criminologists has shown that older people in prison convicted of violent crimes are the least likely to reoffend and end up back in prison.
● Immediately release those held on technical parole violations, all incarcerated people who have been granted clemency, and those within a year of their release date. While DOCCS and DOC have stated that they will release some individuals who qualify for release, this has not been done expeditiously and has resulted in several deaths.

● End solitary confinement for all women and all people. Immediately release all people from all forms of solitary confinement, stop sending people to solitary confinement for any punitive or other reasons, stop using SHU, keeplock, lockdowns or any other forms of solitary as a response to people reporting symptoms and more generally to the virus.

● Release all women to the least restrictive environment possible. Any person who can be moved to community supervision should be. These environments must adhere to Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines. All those returning to the community must have a discharge and treatment plan, including medical and housing resources provided by DOCCS and DOC.

● End solitary confinement for all women and all people. Immediately release all people from all forms of solitary confinement, stop sending people to solitary confinement for any punitive or other reasons, stop using SHU, keeplock, lockdowns or any other forms of solitary as a response to people reporting symptoms and more generally to the virus.

● Award clemency for women who have applied for consideration.

● Create clear and transparent procedures to protect the women inside medically. All procedures should be clearly outlined and shared in postings in each dorm and unit. The process for handling an incarcerated woman exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms or been exposed to it must be shared widely. Incarcerated women must receive testing, humane medical treatment, and adequate nutrition.

● Provide public dissemination of the 7 precautions being taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the number of current infections, and the demographic breakdown of the population. DOCCS and DOC must be clear that there will be no punishment or SHU time given to any incarcerated person quarantined due to potential contraction of COVID19.

● Provide free telecommunications while family visits are suspended. Make telephone calls, emails, and any other communications free and accessible ensuring women maintain family ties, which are especially important while visitation is not an option.

● Appoint a family liaison in each facility for families to call and receive information about the status of their incarcerated loved one.

Women in prison been long ignored - often referred to as the “invisible population.” We, many of us formerly incarcerated women, hear state and city executives assure the public that no life is expendable. Yet the plight of incarcerated women, our sisters, goes unseen and unheard. Public health experts have repeatedly stated that people in jails and prison must be released, as has successfully been done in other nations and states without any threat to public safety.

To aid in this effort, we as a task force stand ready to provide housing, reentry and transitional service assistance to all released women, in the capacity, we are able to do so. We still urge immediate action to ensure all justice-impacted women, mothers and babies not be left behind during this pandemic to die or suffer needlessly. Again, as we support your efforts, please recognize there is much more to do!

Please contact the Justice for Women COVID-19 Task Force conveners, Serena Liguori, New Hour for Women & Children –Li Executive Director at: sliguori@newhourli.org and Sharon White-Harrigan Women’s Community Justice Association Executive Director at: sharon@wcja.org and Rita Zimmer HousingPlus Executive Director at: rita@housingplusnyc.org.

Respectfully,

The Justice for Women COVID-19 Task Force

CC:
Acting Commissioner Annucci
Commissioner Cynthia Brann
Jeremy Shockett, Deputy Secretary of Public Safety, Office of Governor Andrew Cuomo
Cal M. Whiting, Policy Advisory for Public Safety
John Morely, MD, Deputy Commissioner NYS DOCCS, Chief Medical Officer
Corrections and Community Supervision Superintendent
Ross MacDonald, Chief Medical Officer for Correctional Health Services
Elizabeth Glazer, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice
Superintendent Bartlett
Superintendent Lamanna
Superintendent Mitchell ‘Voyd
Superintendent Squiref

Organizational Signators in Support:

A Little Piece Of Light
Abortion Care Network
Advocacy and Research on Reproductive Wellness of Incarcerated People, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
Alden March Bioethics Institute, Albany Medical College
Alliance for Families for Justice
Artivist Entertainment
Baldwin Wallace University
Birth Beyond Bars
Breaking the Chains of Your Mind
Bronx Community Board 9
Brooklyn Defender Services
Brooklyn Law School Criminal Defense & Advocacy Clinic
Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth
Center for Community Alternatives
Center for Constitutional Rights
Center for Disability Rights
Center for Justice, Columbia University
Children’s Haven: A Place of Healing & Hope, Inc.
Circle of Brothers
Citizen Action of New York
Close Rosie’s
Coalition for Women Prisoners
Code Cooperative
Collective Speakers
College and Community Fellowship
College Gateway
Create Forward
CUNY Freedom Prep
D4Entertainment
Darfur People’s Assn of NY
Decarcerate Tompkins County
Disability and Civil Rights Clinic, Brooklyn Law School
Drama Club NYC
Drug Policy Alliance
Educate Don’t Incarcerate
Exodus Transitional Community
Fines and Fees Justice Center
Forward Justice
FWD.us
Gifted Community Services Inc
Hands of Hope Outreach Ministries, INC.
Harry Joe Brown, Jr. Foundation
HALT Solitary, CAIC
Healing Communities Network

Health in Justice Action Lab, Northeastern University School of Law
Hour Children HousingPlus
Hunter Bellevue School of Nursing
Immigrant Defense Project
Ithaca Prisoner Justice Network
Jobs For Life
Justice League
JustLeadershipUSA
Legal Empowerment and Advocacy Hub
LI Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival
Los Angeles Centers for Alcohol and Drug Abuse
Media Projects Inc.
Movement for Family Power
National Action Network
New Beginnings Reentry Services, Inc.
New Hour for Women & Children – LI
New York Communities for Change
NYU Law School Prison Reform and Education Project
Office of Council Member Helen Rosenthal
Osborne Association
Parole Preparation Project
Participatory Defense Durham
Peer Network Of New York
Prison Education Project, Washington University in St. Louis
Prison Studies Project
Providence House
Pure Legacee inc.
Rebuilding Independence My Style Reentry Rocks
Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP
Resilience OC
Rich Family Ministries and PDMNOLA
Rising Ground, Inc.
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
Rockland Coalition to End the New Jim Crow
Rockland Prison Justice Project
Sankofa
SCORES, LLC
Second Chance Reentry
Silent Cry Inc
Sills Family Foundation
Sisters of St. Joseph
Social Justice Action of St. Boniface
Temple Beth El
The Bronx Defenders
The Bronx Learning Lounge
The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls
The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents
The New York Women’s Foundation
The Public Science Project
The Real Cost of Prisons Project
The Rockland Coalition to End the New Jim Crow
The Tadini House
The Talking Drum Incorporated
Unchained Scholars
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Fork
United Methodist Women National Office
University of Denver
University of Kansas
V-Day/One Billion Rising
Visionary V
VOCAL-NY
We Are Better Together Warren Daniel Hairston Project
White Coats for Black Lives
Women & Justice Project
Women Transcending

**Individuals Signators In Support:**

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1. [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/04/07/violence-report/]
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