

Help Us to Build a National Resource for How to Support Prisoners During the Covid-19 Crisis

We are working to build a national resource that will include information that is region specific. If you'd like to help build this resource, please fill out this [form](#).

This is a work in progress! We are collectively building this resource and will update it frequently.

Introduction

The carceral system is an act of warfare against criminalized people--disproportionately Black, indigenous, POC, migrant, disabled, and poor. In a moment of massive health crisis, we have an opportunity to reconsider the interests of incarcerated people, who are now among those at the highest risk for mistreatment and medical neglect. While all incarcerated people should be free--and, as the response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran [demonstrates](#), *could* be released now--our intention in this document is to highlight particular needs of incarcerated people during this outbreak, and the potential interventions we can make to mitigate harm.

People in prisons, jails, and detention centers are at high risk of infection and have seriously abridged access to health care and hygiene within facilities. The overcrowded and unsanitary conditions of confinement, coupled with inadequate, neglectful, and often punitive responses to medical needs, mean that COVID-19 poses [serious risks](#) to this population. And the risks are exacerbated further by the fact that criminalized and incarcerated populations have disproportionately higher rates of serious and chronic illnesses that leave them more vulnerable to viruses, particularly those who are elderly, pregnant, or immunocompromised.

The following guide is intended to help incarcerated people through the public health crisis as well as create opportunities for people on the outside to support one another in various ways. Developing mutual aid networks around supporting prisoners is necessary for the current COVID-19 crisis but are necessary for public health in general as well.

We shouldn't have to do any of this, but we can't rely on prisons to respond to this crisis in ways that attend to people's needs; prisons do not resolve, but rather produce and extend crisis. This short guide includes ways to support prisoners now and a short-list of decarceration campaigns. While some of the things listed here, like adding money to people's commissary or phone accounts helps to line the pockets of the PIC, we also recognize that this is a moment of crisis and that we need to operate in a harm reduction mode to a) address people's immediate needs

for things like food; b) facilitate communication; and c) provide additional support and community to people on the outside advocating for those on the inside.

Your Person's Contact Information

Having all of this information on hand makes it easier to share information if you need to mobilize support for someone inside.

First and Last Name

Date of Birth

State Bureau Identification Number (SBI Number)

Name and address of the prison

Their housing unit

Covid-19 Information

Please make sure that you have accurate information and that you are sharing accurate information! Conspiracy theories and misinformation are particularly harmful right now.

What to do if your person gets sick

If your person becomes symptomatic and they are denied treatment, document everything. Ask them to give you one of their friend's names and to ask that person to call you or contact you if their symptoms become worse or if your person is taken to the infirmary and can't call you.

Prisons generally don't call families to let them know what is happening with their loved one inside so having a plan in place for how to get information is crucial to their safety and your peace of mind.

Call the warden and deputy warden and report that your person is sick and demand action. Document the time and date of the call and who you spoke with. If you reach an assistant, ask their name. Try to be polite, but also express a sense of urgency. Ask them what they plan to do and call back to check to see that it's done.

You can always call and ask to be connected with Medical (sometimes called the infirmary). The person answering the phone may or may not connect you, but the point is to ask. Do not

capitulate to the prison's silence--make them give you information. The more people that do this, the more that it becomes expected that they should do this.

If you are not making progress, consider asking friends and family to make phone calls on behalf of your loved one to demand treatment.

Food

Commissary

Because food is generally scarce in prison and most prisoners supplement their meals with purchases from the commissary it would be helpful to add money to people's books so that they can stock up on what they need. We fear that if the prison goes on lockdown these services will be cut off and people will go hungry. If you are able to put money on your person's books do so now. The food they buy will not go to waste.

If you are in a position of need, please reach out to let someone know. We are currently trying to build capacity to help meet people's needs, but we need your help.

Prisoners on the compound have limits placed on the amount of money they are allowed to spend.

Food Allergies, Kosher Meals, etc.

If your person has food allergies know what they are and how severe they are. Ask them to keep you informed (to the extent possible) of any changes that the facility makes to their diet. Kosher meals are considered specialty meals in some facilities. If your person receives a kosher meal ask them to let you know if this changes in the event of a lockdown.

Medical

Make sure you are added as a HIPPA contact, so that you are able to conduct wellness checks on behalf of your person in case you aren't able to communicate with them directly. [More on HIPPA information here.](#)

Disabilities, Chronic Illnesses, Mental Health

Gather whatever information you have available regarding your person's condition including their diagnosis and any medications they are prescribed. Locate the contact information for the prison and ask for the direct number to the infirmary. If the need arises and your person has not received their regular treatment including medication, call and ask to be connected with the infirmary.

- If they connect you, tell them who you are and why you are calling and give them the information for your person.
- If the operator doesn't connect you with the infirmary, call and ask for the warden's office and follow the same procedure.
- If this doesn't get results start moving up the chain of command and contact the Commissioner for the Department of Corrections in your state, your State Senator and State Representative, and the Governor.

Transgender care

If your person is transgender and hormonal replacement therapy, they may experience gaps in receiving their hormones. Although this is not ideal, it is important for trans people to understand what side effects to look out for in case they are without HRT. For instance, for those assigned female at birth (AFAB) taking testosterone, they may get their periods back. Those assigned male at birth (AMAB) on estrogen can experience mood swings—as well as AFAB and intersex people on T—when their hormonal balance is off.

Although coercive destransition is inherently harmful, we can arm our people with knowing what to expect and how to emotionally prepare for long periods without HRT. Encourage your person to document physical and emotional side effects in detail to being without HRT.

Telephone Calls

If you are able to put some money on your person's phone account then do so. Phones may be difficult for them to access during this time especially if the facility is on lockdown, but having money on their account means that they can contact you or someone else even if it's just for a quick check in.

If the facility has video visits and you are able to afford it, set up a video visit asap. This is particularly important if the facility has halted in-person visits. This is a poor substitute for in-person visits, but it allows you to still see each other. Contact, even virtual, is important both to their mental health and general well-being and to yours.

Depending on the facility there are different companies that offer video visits. You will have to check with the prison, sometimes this information is available on their website. If it's not and you are in communication with your person ask them what company the prison uses.

Legal

Court Appearances

Document and keep track of court appearances or postponements. If your person is represented by a public defender you should ask your person to contact them and find out what the plan is if their court dates get moved. This information also applies if you have private counsel.

Legal Visits and Legal Mail

If the prison goes on lockdown legal visits may also be cancelled. Contact your attorney for information and if they are able to go in to visit then ask that they do.

In the event of mail disruption, legal mail will also not be delivered. This has consequences for people's cases. Contact your attorney and ask what to do. They are best able to advise you about next steps including postponements etc.

Case Files

In the event that your person's case files are destroyed during this crisis, please contact their attorney if they have one and call the warden's office to ask if they will be covering the cost to replace lost files. You can contact the court and the prothonotary's office to request a copy, but they are likely to charge you. Prisoners can request their own case files by writing directly to the prothonotary's office. You should contact a legal aid clinic in your area if you need assistance.

Religious Considerations

Ramadan

Begins: Thursday, April 23

Ends: Saturday, May 23

Facilities may not allow prisoners to observe Ramadan this year. If your person is Muslim talk with them about this and ask them what they need. If there's an Imam at the facility ask for their

name and reach out to them to ask how they can help support Muslim prisoners during this time.

Releases

If your person is due to be released in the next 30, 60 or 90 days ask them what the facility is telling them regarding their release. Our concern is that the crisis will be used as a pretext to extend confinement, and keeping records will help us to better organize support. We need to know what is happening in order to be able to respond effectively.

Families and loved ones can contact the Warden, call the District Attorney's Office, and your Governor to demand the release of your person.

Grievances

Encourage your person to use the internal grievance process. Yes, we know that the prison's grievance process is bullshit and that the people and institution that you are complaining about should not be in a position to decide whether the grievance has merit. However, let's use all of the tools that we have available to us and the grievance process is one. Grievances give us a paper trail and can be used as the foundation for or in support of law suits. We understand that litigation is another tool and not a panacea. We document and support prisoners that file grievances as part of an overall strategy.

Lockdown

If the facility is on lockdown it means that prisoners are confined to their cells 24 hours a day. All movement is terminated including no mail delivered inside of the facility, no access to phones, no access to video visits, no access to tablets (for facilities where prisoners share tablets and have to check them out of a kiosk), no recreation, and no religious services. During a lockdown there may be fewer staff on duty and prisoners are not allowed to access daily showers. These measures, which prison officials have long claimed to be for safety of staff and prisoners, do not cohere with what medical professionals are saying about how to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Lockdowns also intensify the existing tensions inside. If your person tells you that they're being harassed, had their cells shaken down, denied meals, medical attention or anything along those lines, please document it. Get names and times and then call the warden. Keep a running list (hopefully not necessary) of these incidents.

You should contact the prison and ask them when the lockdown will be lifted. Connect with other loved ones to demand that lockdowns be lifted.

Price Gouging During the Crisis

Please document any price hikes on commissary items during this crisis. Doing so allows us to track what the DOC is doing and how much additional profit they are extracting from prisoners and their families. We are demanding that everyone held in confinement be given free commissary and personal care products including soap. Ask your person inside if they've noticed a price increase and document it. This can be as simple as listing the item, the old price and the new price.

Organize

There are efforts across the country to get people released from prison. We are working to compile as many of these as possible, but while we work on this we are sharing calls by different groups on our social media. We encourage local efforts and you can always tag us or message us if you find something that we've overlooked.

1. Call the Warden and let them know of your concerns and ask what they are doing in response to Covid-19.
2. Call the Governor of your state and let them know of your concerns and ask what they are doing in response to Covid-19 in prisons.
3. Call your other elected officials and let them know of your concerns and ask what they are doing in response to Covid-19 in prisons.

We are not powerless in this moment and the more of us that call the better. Here is a phone script that you can use.

Decarcerate Now

A short list of decarceration resources. Use these as models to do similar work in your community!

[Protect Public Health Through Decarceration from the Chicago Bond Fund](#)

[Protecting Public Health in Allegheny County: Release and Divert People from Allegheny County Jail to Fight the Spread of the Coronavirus from the Abolitionist Law Center](#)

[Open Letter to ICE From Medical Professionals Urging the Release of Individuals in Immigration Detention Given the Risk of COVID-19](#)

Demands

1. The immediate release of all detained people, especially all pre-trial detainees, the elderly, pregnant, immunocompromised prisoners, as well as all mothers and infants in prison nurseries, and mothers who are postpartum. Additionally, we demand the release of detained people who have less than 18 months on their sentences. We echo the demand by Critical Resistance to commute the sentences of people serving life without parole.
2. Make publicly available plans with clear accountability for dealing with the outbreak at each prison. We want transparency and a crisis management plan that includes information on testing for Covid-19, making sure that the facility's medical unit is fully staffed during the crisis including overnight and weekends.
3. Prisoners need free access to bleach and hand sanitizer to prevent the spread of Covid-19. These items are considered contraband and therefore prisoners are not allowed to have them. We believe that the current pandemic means that officials need to reevaluate their current policies and act with urgency to address these concerns.
4. Free commissary for all prisoners so that they can stock up on necessary supplies to hold them over in the likely event that the prison locks down. In the event of a prolonged lockdown DOCs are likely to give prisoners Meals-Ready-To-Eat (MREs), these are dehydrated food pouches that are given to the military when out in the field. We believe that it is both possible and necessary for prisons to give people the resources they need to remain healthy and nourished, and so we demand that all prisoners receive free commissary for the duration of this crisis.

5. We demand that all prisons, ICE detention centers, youth detention centers, and other places of confinement make phone calls and video visits free of charge. Additionally, eliminate all fees associated with the use of tablets for entertainment purposes.
6. Infection control tools for all people held in confinement. Test kits, protocols based on medical advice. Health care workers including nurse practitioners and doctors on overnight and weekend shifts, and additional health care workers should be hired as necessary. Medical care should not be outsourced to telemedicine and there should be reduced reliance on so-called 'circuit riders' (one doctor responsible for the care of thousands of people across multiple jails), instead reducing the ratio of incarcerated people to medical professionals.
7. Improved hygiene for shared spaces such as indoor recreation spaces and day rooms, as well as mess halls. Improved hygiene for food service. Health education materials for proper hand washing techniques and other preventative measures for slowing transmission.
8. Wherever quarantine is required, it should be done so in a caring environment, not a punitive one. Quarantined prisoners should not be crowded together or isolated and neglected. The priority should be transfer to hospitals or other adequate medical facilities. But if this is not possible, they should not be placed in solitary confinement under the guise of quarantine.
9. People who are quarantined must not lose their property and wherever possible they should have ways to continue any education or programming they may be participating in.
10. Terminate all sick call fees and other policies and practices that punish or ignore incarcerated people speaking up for their medical needs. It is unconscionable for prisoners to be charged for medical care right now. Additionally, ensure continuity of care for all people remaining in custody that are taking life saving medications, Hormone Replacement Therapy, and other prescription medications.
11. Immediately STOP all reincarceration for Violation of Probation/Parole.
12. Stop all ICE raids.

13. Jails should not be allowed to release sick people on recognizance as a way to avoid paying for their medical care and saddling incarcerated people with medical debt. If a jurisdiction has decided to confine someone, they should take on the responsibility for paying for their medical care. They should also not be allowed to avoid transportation to off-site care as a cost-cutting measure.
14. Cease the use of pepper spray and other chemical agents that can cause breathing complications and spread easily among cells and units.
15. Create councils or other regular meeting forums for the public to interact with prison officials, and a process for reliable communication and working through their needs and concerns.
16. Additional legal aid and/or other meaningful grievance procedures for incarcerated people to document and push back on mistreatment in the crisis. We demand an end to any punitive measures that are designed to prolong sentences.
17. Stronger labor and safety protections for prison laborers, especially those who may be working in support of public health agencies (ie prisoners doing hospital laundry). Hazard-pay for prisoners working in particularly dangerous circumstances.
18. More nutritious meals to improve the health and immune systems of incarcerated people.
19. Reinstate in-person visits as soon as possible.
20. Remove administrative obstacles that make it difficult for prisoners to continue with their education.
21. We demand that all people released from custody including undocumented people automatically have access to SNAP benefits, emergency housing, and are enrolled in public healthcare.
22. Immediately stop the use of shake downs and solitary confinement.

