

COVID-19 and Early Release of Prisoners By Jennifer Rose of the Fine Art Collective

By now, everyone in prison and the outside world is or should be aware of the global COVID-19 pandemic, either from the corporate-controlled news media outlets on T.V. and radio, or printed newspapers, and government declared 'state of emergency' and executive orders to "stay at home."

This "new strain of coronavirus never before seen in humans", known as "COVID-19", that first hit in Wuhan, China, has spread rapidly across the world. On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a "pandemic". Since then, the virus has spread uncontrollably to every country and continent on Earth, and more than 2 million people have died as a result, particularly elderly people, immune-compromised people, and Black people (at least in the U.S.) are disproportionately affected.

COVID-19 Symptoms

The vast majority of people who get sick do recover. They may not experience symptoms for between 2-14 days (the "incubation period") after infection. The most common symptoms are:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath

Many people show no symptoms at all. However, some patients develop severe symptoms, including pneumonia, organ failure, and in some cases pain and death.

Emergency warning signs for severe COVID-19 include:

- Trouble breathing
- Persistent pain or pressure in chest
- New confusion or inability to arouse
- Bluish lips or face

These patients require hospitalization and oxygen support, and in the worst cases may require admission to an intensive care unit to prevent worsening complications including septic shock.

Who is at Higher Risk?

Some people are more vulnerable to severe COVID-19 symptoms:

- Elderly people (50 and older)
- People with chronic illnesses like heart disease, lung disease, diabetes,
- People with weakened immune systems.
- Black people in the U.S. have also been disproportionately affected.

How does COVID-19 Spread?

The virus is spread between people who are in close contact (within 6 feet) through "respiratory droplets" from an infected person coughing or sneezing, and people become infected by contact with the mouth or nose from breathing, or by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the face.

COVID-19 Testing and Treatment

Tests for COVID-19 are available "as necessary", but there has been a limited supply and shortages. There's no specific treatment, cure, or vaccine for COVID-19 as yet. Social distancing and quarantine

is recommended preventive care. Medical recommendations also include:

- Washing hands often with sanitizer or soap and water for 20 seconds.
- Avoid touching your face, eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay at home, or stay 6 feet away from others
- Cover your cough or sneeze with your elbow or a tissue
- Sanitize and disinfect living and dining areas
- Do not share drinking containers, eating utensils, or bedding that is not cleaned.
- Where surgical masks or a face covering such as a scarf or bandana when in public places.

Prison Conditions and Early Release of Specific Incarcerated People

In California prisons, all visitation, education classes, rehabilitation or self-help groups, and religious services have been cancelled until further notice.

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has implemented a coronavirus prevention plan statewide in all of its prisons and facilities, and following the recommendations of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention as well as state and local public health officials (such as those mentioned above).

Additionally, the CDCR has posted educational videos on institutional close-caption TV channels, concerning COVID-19, and informational handouts have been posted in the housing units. CDCR Secretary Ralph Diaz directly addressed all CDCR prisoners in a personal video-recorded speech posted on institutional channels.

Here in Salinas Valley State Prison, we have had inmate movement restricted to medical appointments at medical clinic on the yard, or the Correctional Treatment Center (CTC) at each prison. Must "non-emergency"

outside medical appointments and specialty care, including surgeries, have been temporarily cancelled or postponed. This has directly affected me by the delay of my electrolysis and sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) that I was approved for more than a year ago by prison health care officials in Sacramento. I'm very distressed by the long process of surgical prep, and the continued undue delay of my gender affirming surgery from actually being scheduled and performed!

While all prison staff here are reportedly being screened for symptoms and given temperature checks before entering the facilities, this is far from adequate to prevent introduction of the virus into the prison and exposure of the inmate population to this deadly virus. Here at Salinas Valley, we've had two on-duty staff member deaths within the past 2 weeks, of unknown

causes. Correctional officers serve our food because we are canteen fed at this maximum-security facility. Additionally, social distancing is impossible in prison, we are double cell housed with another inmate, and lower level prisoners are housed in dorms where they are double-bunked very closely next to dozens of others.

These conditions create a dangerous and unsafe condition which could lead to an outbreak of COVID-19. Any inmate showing symptoms of COVID-19 or flu-like symptoms are placed on quarantine isolation in housing unit sections designated for that purpose. I'm unaware of any testing or treatment those with symptoms, and have only heard of a handful of confirmed cases of inmates with COVID-19. A higher number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection have been found among staff at the prisons.

I've heard of COVID-19 outbreaks at other prisons, such as Rikers

Island jail in New York and other more vulnerable areas.

Across the U.S., people are being released from prisons and jails in the wake of this pandemic. Abolitionists and social justice advocates are encouraged by these small gains toward decarceration, and are seizing the opportunity to build momentum and advocate for even more releases of as many people as possible.

The Los Angeles County Jails reduced their inmate population by 600. Alameda County Sheriff's Department reported a 25% reduction of its inmate population at the Santa Rita Jail. Also, on March 25, California Governor Gavin Newsome granted like 23 commutations and 5 pardons, which were likely expedited in an effort to ease prison overcrowding.

Similar releases have been reported in many other countries and states across the U.S.

CDCR announced on March 31st that it will expedite the early parole release of all inmates within 60 days of their release date. However, abolitionists and progressive social justice activists are advocating for the release of many more incarcerated people who fit the following criteria:

- Elderly prisoners over 50 or 60.
- At-risk prisoners with chronic illnesses or compromised immune systems (e.g. heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, or auto-immune disease).
- Parole eligible inmates.

Governors should use their clemency powers to release all incarcerated people who fit the above criteria. County sheriffs should also continue to release these identifiable categories of inmates, and all pretrial detainees who do not pose an unreasonable risk to public safety. CDCR should expand

their early release of inmates from those within 60 days of their parole date, to all who have less than 6 months or a year to complete their sentences. These are extraordinary circumstances that call for more drastic measures by the State to prevent a mass COVID-19 outbreak among the incarcerated people who are housed in its facilities, and in many cases unnecessarily held in prisons that are overcrowded when alternatives to incarceration are readily available and more effective in rehabilitation of people convicted of a crime.

International Prisoner Resistance

In the U.S., immigrants went on hunger strike at 3 ICE Detention Centers. These are concentration camps where many people, including women and children, are held pending asylum or deportation hearing. Often these people are held for years without being charged.

with any crime, and without due process or a fair hearing. They are subjected to horrific and inhumane conditions, deprived of basic medical care, and separated from children and family support by transfer to distant places across the U.S. Women and trans immigrants often suffer sexual abuse and gender violence. At least a handful of children and some adults have died in custody at ICE Detention Centers, and some children have even become "lost" in the system and unaccounted for to horror and outrage of their parents and relatives.

In Iran, nearly 85,000 people have been released from prisons since the start of the pandemic. Hundreds of prison rebels escaped from four semi-open prisons in São Paulo, Brazil after Easter holiday celebrations were cancelled and visiting restrictions were imposed. In Italy, prison riots broke out and about 50

prisoners escaped after visiting restrictions were imposed due to COVID-19.

What Can People Do?

IF you are incarcerated and are not getting the care you need, or staff are not adhering to the recommended policies and practices for COVID-19 prevention in prison facilities, you can:

- File an inmate grievance according to proper procedure stating your issue and requesting remedial actions. (e.g. adequate soap and disinfectant, quarantine isolation of those with symptoms, face masks or other reasonable accommodations, etc.)
- Have friends and family call and email CDCR officials at (916) 445-7682, or www.cdcr.ca.gov, (or correctional agency in other states).
- Inform local media about prison conditions, especially about any failure to isolate and test sick people.

* IF you are parole eligible and/or in a high risk group, such as the elderly or chronic illness inmates, write and call Gov. Gavin Newsome to seek clemency/commutation. The California Constitution (and other states' constitutions) grants clemency authority to the Governor in all criminal cases, all inmates who exhausted their appeals may apply for a commutation or pardon, by completing a required form and sending it to the Governor by U.S. Mail. They should clearly state their reasons for seeking clemency, such as having an extreme or unfair sentence that was disproportionate to the crime, or having been a model inmate and/or achieving educational goals and rehabilitation program certificates. Also indicate if you are elderly, at-risk, and/or parole eligible for COVID-19 concerns.

- enlist the help and support of your family members, community groups, and friends or advocates for your campaign to be released from prison.

Campaign to Free Jennifer Rose!

i'm an incarcerated transwoman and a Hartnell College student here at Salinas Valley State Prison. i'm a long-time abolitionist and imprisoned anarchist member of the FireAnt collective (check out the FireAnt zine at: bloomingtonabc.noblogs.org). i've been incarcerated in California prisons for 30 years, including having spent a decade in solitary confinement at the notorious Pelican Bay SHU (from 1994 thru 2004), along with some of the leaders and organizers of the statewide California Prisoner Hunger strikes against long-term solitary confinement and torture in 2011 and after.

Now, i'm 50 years old, have had serious medical conditions, including a 2006 Valley Fever infection

(a respiratory illness), and chronic hepatitis C diagnosed back in 1999 or 2000; and i'm also currently parole eligible under Prop. 57 as a "non-violent" third strike offense. i have already served the "full-term" (or statutory penalty) during my time already served on this sentence. My parole suitability hearing is scheduled for July 28, 2020 by the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH).

i have already been "accepted" by three transitional housing re-entry programs, including:

- Options Recovery Services in Berkeley
- GEO Re-entry Services (Taylor St.) in San Francisco
- Amistad de Los Angeles

Additionally, i've earned certificates from GOGI (Getting Out By Going In), the Alternatives to Violence Program - California (AVP), and Criminal Offender Rehabilitation Establishment (C.O.R.E.). i plan to continue my education on release, and am currently learning employment skills in my prison job assignment

Page 16

as a tutor in the Peer Literacy Mentor Program!

i'm excited by the possibility of early release from prison under the rapidly changing situation and conditions of COVID-19 pandemic emergency protocols. i'm saddened by the news of so many peoples deaths, especially those in the hard hit areas of the U.S. such as New York, and in other countries like Italy. i'm also outraged that such a global tragedy is likely the result of a government or military laboratory created virus that might have been leaked either unintentionally or as an experiment, and quickly became uncontrollable and spread rapidly across the entire world. If such a thing happened, it will never be confirmed or proven, and the governments will not be held accountable for this greatest atrocity ever in our world history against all humanity!

i've been doing my part from in prison to educate other

prisoners in my housing unit, share news and literature updates on COVID-19 self-care and advocacy efforts for mass decarceration and early release of incarcerated people in prisons and jails everywhere. This is a window of opportunity that has changed everything, and we need to build on this momentum toward ending mass incarceration in the U.S. Once and for all!

Although I'm anxious along with the majority of people, and realize that things will never be the same as we recover from the COVID-19 War and return to a "new normal", I see so many hopeful possibilities for systemic change in the status quo. We've witnessed a fierce showing of solidarity and human compassion among friends and neighbors, and in communities all over the U.S. and the world. People are taking care of each other, providing material aid and free service to those in need, and finding ways to stay socially connected and active via the

internet and by phone or mail. I am very focused on communicating with my family by phone, and writing letters abolitionist and advocacy groups, to seek support for my early release on parole, or a commutation of sentence by Gov. Newsome.

There will be a National Grievance Petition filing day on May 7, 2020 directed to the U.S. Department of Justice relating to all conditions in prison, including but not limited to COVID-19 response and advocating more expanded early release of prisoners.

I need peoples' support for my early release on parole, and a commutation of sentence. Please write a support letter addressed to the BPH and Gov. Gavin Newsome and send it to me at the address below!

You can also call and email CDCR Secretary Ralph Diaz and Gov. Newsome to advocate for early release of more parole eligible and/or high risk inmates such as me!

Contact:

Ralph Diaz, Secretary
California Department of Corrections & Rehab.
PO BOX 942883
Sacramento, CA 94283-0001
Phone: (916) 445-7682
Web: www.cdcr.ca.gov

Governor Gavin Newsome
Governor's Office
State Capitol, First Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814
Phone: (916) 445-2841
Web: www.governor.ca.gov

Please support my campaign for
Commutation and early release!
I look forward to joining you all on
the outside in the struggle against
fascism and COVID-19, and for total
liberation of all oppressed and
incarcerated people! (A)

Dare to struggle, dare to win!
Stay safe! (U)

Sources: Stay healthy, stay connected:
COVID19 Information for Prisoners (Blue Ridge
ABE); COVID-19 Update Letter

(Prisoner Advocacy Network).

Please post your comments on my blog or write to me directly with support letters addressed to the BPH and Gov. Newsome! Also, postage stamps are needed for my campaign and may be sent by mail. Thank you!

Jennifer Rose, E23852
Salinas Valley State Prison
PO BOX 1050
Soledad, CA 93960