

March 27, 2020

The Honorable JB Pritzker  
Governor of Illinois  
100 W. Randolph Street  
Chicago, IL 60601

Dear Governor Pritzker:

On March 9, 2020 you issued a Gubernatorial Disaster Proclamation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 20, 2020 you took even more strict preemptive measures and enacted a stay-at-home order, [prohibiting public and private gatherings of any number of people occurring outside of a household](#). We fully support the efforts you have already undertaken. However, as you are closing down public spaces and urging both social distancing and self-quarantining to limit the spread of COVID-19, we, as public health experts and concerned citizens, write to urge you to take immediate action to safeguard the lives of those involved in our statewide court system and Illinois Department of Corrections, including those who work or are detained in these facilities, their families, and their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic requires a strategic response based on the conditions we know to exist and the interventions we know to effectively limit transmission. Your Executive Order shows that you are well aware that the COVID-19 virus [transmits rapidly in densely populated spaces](#), which is why the CDC [recommends](#) that people keep at least six feet away from each other and avoid gatherings of more than ten people.

This “social distancing” has been difficult to accomplish in our society generally, but is impossible to achieve in our state correctional facilities, jails and youth detention centers as things currently stand. Almost [75,000 people](#) are incarcerated in these facilities. Prisons and jails contain high concentrations of people in close proximity, with people [housed](#) in tightly-packed and poorly-ventilated dormitories; they share toilets, showers, and sinks; they wash their bedsheets and clothes infrequently; and often lack access to basic personal hygiene items. These facilities lack the ability to [separate sick people from well people](#) and to quarantine those who have been exposed. In fact, on March 23, 2020, it was reported that there are [two people in the Cook County jail](#) who have been diagnosed with COVID-19. We are no longer

speaking in terms of possibilities- the imminent threat is here, now. We need you to act before this escalates.

Concern over the people detained in our jails and prisons should be sufficient to spur you to action, but they are not nearly the only people who stand to suffer if conditions are not changed: it is inconceivable that an outbreak in a prison or detention center stays confined to that facility. Through “jail churn” staff, correctional officers, judges, doctors, and visitors will all be exposed to COVID-19 in these facilities and will carry and spread it in the community at large. There are reports that a [Cook County correctional officer](#) has tested positive for COVID-19.

Facilities combine the worst aspects of cruise ships and nursing homes when dealing with COVID-19, as they contain high concentrations of people in close proximity and are breeding grounds for the uncontrolled transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Unless you immediately address this threat, you are leaving Illinois vulnerable to a massive outbreak of COVID-19. But it is within your power **to immediately release people from jails and prisons** and thus work to mitigate the spread of this disease. To that end, we ask that you take the following urgent steps:

First, we ask that you commute sentences for **all elderly people**. Nearly [20 % of Illinois Department of Corrections inmates are over 50](#). While the SARS-CoV-2 virus infects people of all ages, the World Health Organization (WHO) is clear that [older people](#) are at a higher risk of getting severe COVID-19 disease and dying. In fact, the risk of severe disease gradually increases with age starting from around 40 years. Also, older people who are released from prison [pose little risk to public safety](#).

Second, we are also asking that you commute sentences for the **medically vulnerable population** including persons suffering from [cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer](#). In addition to older people, WHO has identified persons with these underlying medical conditions to be at greater risk for contracting severe COVID-19. While there is little known yet about the effects of COVID-19 on pregnant women, the CDC [explains](#) that with viruses from the same family as COVID-19, and other viral respiratory infections such as influenza, pregnant women have had a higher risk of developing severe illness.

Third, we are asking that you commute sentences for **all persons who have one year or less remaining on their sentence**. This measure will limit overcrowding that can lead to [further spread](#) of COVID-19 and free up beds that will be needed to care for the sick who should be housed separate from others.

Fourth, we call on you to urge local officials to **drastically reduce jail populations**. Many who are admitted to jail only stay for a short period of time, and more people churn through jails in a day than are admitted or released from state and federal prisons in 2 weeks. To prevent a severe outbreak, local officials should take the following steps immediately:

1. Release of anyone who is held pretrial and who does not pose an unreasonable safety risk to a specific person or persons;
2. Release of all people serving a misdemeanor sentence who are within six months of their release date;
3. Release of all people held locally on probation and parole technical violation detainers or sentences;
4. Increased use of citations in place of arrests and limit custodial arrest only to those few accused of crimes that pose a serious safety risk to a specific person or persons; and
5. Reclassification of misdemeanor offenses that do not threaten public safety into non-jailable offenses.

Only if such steps are taken will Illinois have a chance to flatten the curve of COVID-19 in our communities.

Respectfully,

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