



The JUSTICE for WOMEN COVID-19 TASKFORCE

Respect*Dignity*Safety

4 West 43rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10036
646.546.8591

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

Statement of Purpose:

To bring women home and improve the conditions for women at any facility in NYS; and at the RMSC in NYC

Conveners

*Serena Liguori-ED

*Sharon White-Harrigan-ED

Leaders

Ana Zukowsky

*Anisah Sabur-Mumin

Anita Kennedy

Bridget Shanahan

*Brunilda Rivera

*Carole Eady-Porcher

Chaplain Kim Elano

*Chermaine Black

*Cheryl Wilkins

Connie Tempel

Danielle Minelli-Pagnotta

*Denise McCreary

*Donna Hylton

*Greer Ellis

*Grace Price

*Hope Sanders

*Ivelisse Gilestra

*Jessica Vargas

Joan Montbach

Jordyn Rosenthal

*Kandra Clark

*Kathy Morse

*Laura Tina Tinen

Laura Whitehorn

*Lissette Bamenga

Lorie Goshin

*Lorrayne Patterson

*Marion Rodriguez

Misael Syldor

*Ms. "V"

Rabbi Hilly Haber

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Rita Zimmer

*Rusti Miller-Hill

Ruth McDaniels

Sarita Daftary

Stephanie Bazell

Tanya Krupat

*Veronica Sullivan-Blyther

Vanee Sykes

*Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin

*Women with lived experience

qualify for release, this has not been done expediently and has resulted in several deaths.

- 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.
- 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