

March 16, 2020

RE: Use Executive Powers to Release Elderly, Aging, and Vulnerable Populations—Sign on Letter. At time of sending 580 individual signers and 44 organizational signatories

Dear Governor Whitmer,

We realize things are incredibly tense right now and there are many moving parts to the ever evolving COVID-19 pandemic. We applaud your efforts to move toward social distancing measures that will protect our most vulnerable populations. We also applaud the MDOC's participation in COVID-19 response planning and implementation of better cleaning protocols and waivers for co-pays.

We are writing this letter to ask you to review and release long-serving elderly people & vulnerable and chronically sick people from prison into care with their families and loved ones. There are currently over 760 people in prison who are 70 years or older. As of October 2018 there were 2,969 people in prison who were 50 years of older and have served 20 years or more. And, 2,236 people 55 or older who have served 20 years or more. COVID-19 is very much harming the general elderly population and prison administrators and criminal justice experts consider 50 to 55 to be elderly.

We are hopeful that this COVID-19 crisis brings to light, for you, the stark and complicated importance of the state prison system and shifts criminal justice reforms into more of a priority position in your policy platform.

The governor plays a key role in ending mass incarceration and moving our state away from a system focused on punishment and retribution to one of healing and transformation. The governor has the power to instruct the parole board to release more long-serving parole-eligible people. And, ultimately, it is, you, the governor who can design systems and policies to process more commutations and release people who have no chance at freedom unless they are commuted.

The American Friends Service Committee and Safe and Just Michigan along with representatives from the ACLU-MI and the Sentencing Project have met multiple times with your policy staff about your executive commutation powers. We have recommended that you focus on releasing priority populations by using your ability to grant commutations.

We have attached the aforementioned policy recommendations regarding release of more long serving people from prisons in Michigan to this letter. However, we are asking for you to take bold steps using both your commutation powers and your executive order powers to move elderly people who have served long time out of the prison context as soon as possible.

The State of Emergency declaration for COVID-19 allows suspension of certain statutes to best

cope with the emergency. You have an opportunity to streamline the commutation process so that those most at risk from COVID-19 can be released immediately if they are not a danger to society.

Michigan's draconian sentencing patterns and implementation of laws like truth in sentencing and politically motivated policies like "life means life" have led to an overburdened prison system. In all reality, prisons are no place to grow old. Prisons are no place to live with chronic illness. Prisons are no place to live when one has traumatic brain injuries or severe and persistent mental illness. Prison staff and state MDOC administrators have had to navigate difficult terrain to try to meet the needs of aging people in prisons and people with serious health and mental health care needs.

Our state prison system eats up vast amounts of the general fund in order to fund in-prison health care and mental health care. This burden could be diminished by releasing aging people to their loved ones where they will be cared for by community and federal dollars.

Further, we have been critical of the very narrow medical parole bill that passed out of the state legislature in 2019. This medical parole bill does nothing to provide relief for the most vulnerable within the system. When this crisis begins to lessen, we ask for you to lead the movement toward the creation of true compassionate release that could apply to all people in prison, including people serving natural life sentences.

Unprecedented times call for courageous and bold leadership. We know that people who are serving long sentences have often done the deepest and most transformative work on their internal lives. They have held themselves accountable for the worst thing they ever did and have served long and harsh sentences away from loved ones and communities.

We are asking for you to act boldly and review and release elderly and vulnerable, long-serving people from prison. We are on the brink of catastrophic possibilities and we should unite to release people who have long been ready to return home and let them be cared for by the people who have loved them through the years.

We look forward to your response. And, when this crisis comes to a close, we look forward to exploring ways to move toward a more a criminal justice system where people are given chances to show they are not the worst decision they ever made.

You can contact, Natalie Holbrook, Program Director of American Friends Service Committee-Michigan Criminal Justice Program with concerns or questions. 734.330.0555 or nholbrook@afsc.org

At the time of this sending —we are keeping the sign on open—we have 580 individual signatures and 44 organizational signatories. We have email contacts for all signers. We will

send more signatories in the coming days.

Sincerely,

Organizational Signatories:

ACLU-Michigan

ABISA

Alabama – CURE

ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal

American Citizens for Justice

American Friends Service Committee-Michigan Criminal Justice Program

Action of Greater Lansing

Beyond Bars Collaborative

Black Lives Matter Michigan

California Coalition for Women's Prisoners

Citizens for Fairness

Citizens for Prison Reform

Colorado-CURE, Inc.

Crucible 21 Ministries

Desktop Dog Training & Development

Detroit Justice Center

The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation

Extended Outreach Ministry Initiatives and Services

Felony Murder Elimination Project

Fresh Coast Alliance

Friends of Restorative Justice

GR Rapid Response to ICE

Greater Grace Temple Prison Ministry

Humanity for Prisoners

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice
JustLeadershipUSA
Justice Strategies
Kent County I-BOND Fund
Mental Health Coalition for Michigan's Youth
Michigan Center for Youth Justice
Michigan CURE (MI-CURE), Key Perry
Michigan student power network
Michigan Women's Justice & Clemency Project
Michigan Liberation
Michigan Prisoner Rehabilitation Credit Act Coalition
Michigan United
The Mutual Aid Network of Ypsilanti
MOSES
National Association of Social Workers-MI
No Detention Centers in Michigan
Northwest Initiative ARRO
One Love Global
Oregon CURE
Parole Illinois
Power in Passion, LLC
Poor Peoples Campaign-Washtenaw County
Prison Creative Arts Project
RedeemingKimberly
Restorative Justice at UUAA
SADO
Safe and Just Michigan

Siwatu Freedom Team

Students for Justice in Palestine at EMU and Arab Student Union at EMU

Texas CURE (TX CURE)

The Sentencing Project

Together We Are Safe

Transforming Church of Detroit

University of Michigan Carceral State Project

UM Prison Birth Project

We the People-Michigan

While We Were Away Podcast

Young Democratic Socialists of America at the University of Michigan

Youth Justice Fund