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Prisons in a Time of Pandemic: Protect Our People

By Executive Director Dorsey Nunn

I was incarcerated in San Quentin when a flu epidemic ripped through the prison. You could literally see and hear it coming. Think of an airplane hangar, within which a 5-story wall of 4 ½ x 10-foot cells stretches hundreds of feet long, caging hundreds of fathers, brothers, and sons. You hear the man at the far end of the block and a couple levels down start coughing hard. He's blowing his nose, coughing up phlegm, and spitting it out. Hopefully into the toilet.

Then the cat next to him starts coughing. Then the person above that one. Then the CO walking the tier coughing hard while passing every cell. Every day, every hour, you can hear the sickness coming towards you. And there's not a damned thing you can do about it.

While there's a foot of concrete between you and your neighbor, between you and the wide-open space filled with sickness are just 14 steel bars and a whole lot of air. In the dining hall we're packed together, sharing trays and food. Sure there's a "hospital," but, given the history of inadequate medical care, infected people have few real options. We have been aware that the prison population has been aging for decades, so it should surprise no one that they are at the greatest risk.

While my experience at San Quentin happened decades ago, the prison itself hasn't changed. People are still crammed into cages. There's a larger, more modern medial ward, but there are exponentially more people incarcerated there, too. And a larger staff of CO's rotating in and out all day—currently only being "asked" if they have symptoms of the virus. No testing. But our families, neighbors, and friends are being treated as if they're vectors of deadly diseases, and they've had all their visits cancelled.

You can't isolate the 2.2 million people currently incarcerated in the whole country from each other, and, in reality, from the rest of the community.

What are our options?

We demand the immediate release of people most vulnerable, starting with people over 50 and people with medical conditions. Also release people who are near the end of their sentence so, like with the current Alternative Custody Program, they can be with their families during this crisis. This also results in creating more space inside prisons.

We demand prison and jail staff take all necessary precautions to protect the people currently incarcerated. Test everyone—especially the CO's and deputies rotating in and out of the facilities multiple times a day. Provide real health care. And be open and transparent about both conditions and practices. People die in darkness.

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We demand direct, cost-free contact with family members. Stop charging a dime for calls, emails, or letters. Outside, we're up in arms when people exploit the vulnerable by jacking up the prices of sanitizer, soap, toilet paper, and other necessary supplies. But prison and jail canteens price-gouge on a daily basis, and everyone's ok with that? Telecom companies, JPay, and Department of Corrections across the country have been holding incarcerated people and our family members hostage for profit for decades. It's time to stop this immoral practice of putting profit over people. CDCR recently announced free calls for a week—a good start but not enough. Give each person inside a cell phone to keep in free, constant contact with their family. Our families could better manage our resources, everyone will benefit.

Now is an extraordinary opportunity to strategically release the elderly and the most vulnerable people into restorative justice programs in their own communities. We can beat this global pandemic by starting with saving the most vulnerable in our society—our people in prisons in jails. Call on your local sheriff and state DOC secretaries to protect our people and keep our families together. Now is truly a time of All of Us or None.

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