Involuntary Servitude: Life as Civilly Dead

It reveals itself in prison fire brigades, the replacement of a name with a number, and the plantation fields of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a.k.a. Angola. It is slavery by other names -- “mass incarceration” or “prison labor” -- and it is an intentional continuation of America’s shameful past. Page 10
As members of All of Us or None, we pledge:
• To demand the right to speak in our own voices
• To treat each other with respect and not allow differences to divide us
• To accept responsibility for any acts that may have caused harm to our families, our communities or ourselves.
• To fight all forms of discrimination
• To help build the economic stability of formerly incarcerated people
• To claim and take care of our own children and our families
• To support community struggles to stop using prisons as the answer to social problems
• To play an active role in making our communities safe for everyone.

“Doing Time” is an acrylic painting by Gerald Morgan, an artist incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California. Morgan is 67 years old and has spent the last two decades incarcerated. This work, along with other pieces from the San Quentin prison art program, is on display in the offices of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

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Long before it was a question of forced labor it was the issue of caging me as a juvenile for being incorrigible. No real crime but a demand that I do the dance of a slave that usually accompanied most arrests; the dance that starts with being forced to get naked, to stick out my tongue, to lift my genitals, bend over and spread my butt cheeks and to cough. It was a dance that I was forced to initially do at Hillcrest Juvenile Hall and forced repeat throughout my decade of incarceration. I have always imagined this dance as similar to that of a slave prior to being sold on the auction block. When I asked authorities why I was being subjected to such treatment they would allege that it was to search for contraband. However, I always assumed it was conducted to strip me of my dignity by force and to leave no doubt who was in charge.

It took me a long time to come to grips with the notion that I’d been enslaved. I so much wanted to see myself as something else, someone other than the person who had been enslaved for over 10 years. Maybe my status would have been more apparent if I had been beaten by a whip instead of a club, choked by a rope instead of a knee or if I had toiled in the hot sun picking cotton. Did due process afford me an opportunity in court to make something of myself by force and to leave no doubt who was in charge.

Thirty-two dollars-a-month was the most I ever made on any prison job that I worked. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to allow me to deny that I was not a slave and that somehow I had a choice. This belief was as false as assuming that robbery victims have a choice, that they happily hand over their money at gun point. The manifestation of my enslavement was the labor that was being extracted by force or fear of institutional punishment or the reality of never being released.

However difficult it was for me to accept my status as a slave, it is more important for the public to come to grips with the fact that we are collectively holding slaves. I used to wonder why, during the period of chattel slavery, human beings could be beat in the middle of a town square without objection. How was such brutality ever considered normal? I know now it was due to a potent narrative that operated under the color of law.

The ugly truth is that we would never have been able to maintain the prison industrial complex or engage in mass incarceration without forcing hundreds of thousands prisoners to labor without pay, or paying them so little that they are unable to make a meaningful contributions to their family or their communities.

As I write this opinion piece our country is being visited by riots from coast to coast because of systemic racism and murder. We have yet to do the easy stuff like divorce ourselves from vestiges of slavery. It is indefensible that in my own state, California, involuntary servitude is still protected by the state constitution. It needs to be removed. When will we have the nerve to face the reality that such a clause in our Constitution is morally reprehensible?

A Note From AOUON Founding Member Dorsey Nunn

If you would like to send feedback or contribute to the All of Us or None newspaper, please contact the Editor.

Paula Lehan-Ewing
All of Us or None
4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608
Phone: (415) 625-7036 x328
paula@prisonerswithchildren.org
For Eric “Maserati-E” Abercrombie, music was life but life was something much darker. It wasn’t until he was incarcerated that he started processing his trauma through his art. Now, when life happens, Maserati-E knows he can always find peace in his craft.

Thoughts racin’ through my mind like Nascars
Never understood the purpose of perpin’ the ones who act hard

He lifts his head for a moment and sees a crowd beginning to gather. He breathes deeply and goes back into his trance. In this moment he is more than his CDCR number. He is Maserati-E, a stage name he gave himself when he was younger.

3-2-1 you’re done
It can happen so fast your face will still be stunned
I’m tryin’ to cool it down, ’cause I was as hot as they come
By the time the last string is strum, the yard is full.

Prior to incarceration, Eric lived a double life: one with music and one with violence. He is a third-generation musician. His grandparents were musicians, his mother was a rapper and his father was a signed artist with Sony.

Eric wrote his first song when he was five. It was the same year he saw a dead body for the first time. So while his lyrics continued to have a message of hope, he said, he was convinced that his odds of getting out of Oakland alive were slim to none. He routinely saw beat-downs and killings and eventually became violent himself.

“When you feel defensive or like you do not matter, it shows up in your actions,” he said. “I just went through every day not caring enough whether I lived or died, and I didn’t think about how that belief system affected me or those around me.”

When he was 17, Eric was sentenced 10 years after picking up a second strike-offense. He was one of the few people in juvenile hall looking at serving years instead of months. That, along with the fear of

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a life sentence if he incurred another strike, forced him to a turning point. He knew he had to change, but he wasn’t sure exactly how.

Corrections determined that because of his record and so-called risk factors -- like the fact that he wasn’t married or employed (not highly unusual for a 17-year-old) -- Eric had to be transferred to adult prison. He was at Receiving at Old Folsom when he met Samuel Brown.

Sam was the first in a long line of mentors Eric learned from in prison. He was an intellectual -- always reading or writing essays. When Eric had a run-in with a corrections officer, Sam would tell him to write it down. Those words would eventually be crafted into songs and, for the first time, Eric realized he didn’t need to keep the reality of his environment separate from his art. Instead, he could use his craft to process the trauma that had perpetuated the cycle of violence in his life.

During his time at Old Folsom, Eric also met Roy Stevenson. Roy could write two or three songs a day, always about hard stuff but never using a curse word.

“He could be talking about gangsta shit but never cuss, and that intrigued the hell out of me,” said Eric. “He challenged me to master the craft and the art of really being in control of my words by having real intent in my songs, just come with a powerful message.”

After a couple years in Old Folsom, Eric picked up a guitar and started performing on the prison yard. At times, he and the other musicians would have full-fledged shows, he said, packing the basketball courts and table areas with normally segregated factions intermingling. Swept away in the music, the prisoners were lifted beyond the walls, united by something larger than their shared institutional address.

“That were the moments that are impressionable because it’s a method of escape,” Eric said. “You take that with you wherever you go, and with all the prison transfers that happen, you’re touching prison yards you’ve never even been to because people are holding on to those moments.”

In fact, many prisoners who saw Eric perform in Old Folsom did take the experience with them. By the time he arrived at San Quentin in 2017, he already had a following. Within days of his transfer there he was recording in the prison studio. He started with “Break the Mold,” a song inspired by racial tensions at Old Folsom. The song was ultimately featured in the Netflix documentary “Q-Ball” and it helped the film earn an Emmy nomination for Musical Direction.

Eric’s return home, however, hasn’t been easy. Since his release in August 2019, he’s suffered the harsh realization that while he had transformed himself in prison, the violent world he’d lived in as a kid had stayed relatively the same. In the nine months he’s been home, Eric has had to bury nine loved ones including a young cousin who was murdered last month.

But rather than suppress his feelings of grief, anger and sadness, he now pours his heart into new music he’s creating. In a new song, “Silver Lining,” Eric sings about reconciling his gratitude for freedom with his sense of loss for his family.

“The world didn’t change, but I gotta protect my peace and trust the process,” Eric said. “When I write songs, I try to shift perspectives and give people the option to think a little differently about their world.”

TO ALL OUR COMRADES FEELING THE PAIN OF THIS MOMENT, KNOW WE WILL NEVER STOP FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE ALL OF US OR NONE!
This is a critical moment, not only in our nation’s history but in the history of our movement. It is a moment to reaffirm that our mission is too crucial to take a back seat to anything, even a pandemic.

It’s in that spirit that California-based Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, the fiscal sponsor of All of Us or None National, organized a reimagined day of advocacy. On May 18, the organization hosted the first-ever Digital Quest for Democracy, in which hundreds of formerly incarcerated people and their allies joined together, to speak on their own behalf and ensure that those in power were listening.

This was the 8th annual Quest for Democracy, but the first virtual version, particularly of this magnitude, in California. Fifty allied organizations participated, with directly impacted members speaking to lawmakers within the digital space.

As in the past, Quest for Democracy gave members of our movement the opportunity to advocate as experts. Their firsthand accounts of incarceration and reentry served to humanize the people impacted by decisions being made in the state capital. Despite being physically apart, the heart and passion behind these stories were still palpable.

Throughout the event participants gathered in seven digital breakout rooms, each of which held a forum for two bills in three consecutive, half-hour sessions. Representatives from over 50 district offices attended these virtual legislative visits, where they listened and engaged in discussions relating to 14 policy initiatives.

The lawmakers also contributed valuable insights. In the virtual room discussing ACA 6, the Free the Vote Act, LSPC Policy Director Ken Oliver asked legislative attendees what could be done to move the opposition. The bill, which would restore voting rights to 50,000 Californians on parole, needs to pass the state Senate before it can be referred to voters.

“I think like any good policy, what you have to do to get people on the fence is tie those voting issues to other issues that are important to them,” said Alex Barnett, a policy consultant with California Senate Majority Leader Bob Hertzberg. “Like the school to prison pipeline, there might be an education member and if you tie in voting rights to that it might push them in the right direction.”

The digital platform also enabled advocates outside of California to participate and share their knowledge. In a legislative session featuring a proposed constitutional amendment to eradicate involuntary slavery from state law, Kamau Allen, an organizer with Abolish Slavery Colorado, discussed how a similar amendment was introduced in and impacted his state. In Colorado, the measure, Amendment A, was a success among lawmakers and voters.

Quest for Democracy also featured a main room, a virtual “Capitol Lawn,” featuring speakers from some of the participating organizations and

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In addition to the virtual lawn’s keynote speeches, there was an entertainment segment. In collaboration with Hip Hop 4 Change, a number of artists gave powerful performances, including international R&B star Goapele, Echo Park’s fearsome emcee Klassy, and Oakland Originals, a breakdancing crew. Joining them were Maserati-E, who’s profiled in this month’s “Spotlight” section, and spoken word artist Kyla Lacey (right), who contributed two poems.

Both of her poems are worth repeating in their entirety. But with spatial limitations being what they are, this verse will serve for now:

The justice system shouldn’t be a business
Especially since it’s a scam
Because rehabilitation in this country
Has turned into nothing but twisting peoples’ arms
Just to hear them yell, “Uncle Sam.”

Here are the bills, policies and budget asks that were discussed at Digital Quest for Democracy:
- SB 1290 (Durazo/Mitchell) – End Juvenile Fees: Ends harmful collection of juvenile administrative fees and criminal justice fees.
- SB 144 & 555 (Mitchell) – Fines & Fees: Limits the assessment and collection of various fines and fees; limits the over-charges for canteen items in county jails.
- AB 2342 (McCarty) – Parole Good Time Credits: Grants good time credits to individuals on parole to lessen the amount of time they would be under state supervision.
- SB 1064 (Skinner) – Proof Before Punish: Prohibits the use of unverified confidential information in decisions made by the Department of Corrections.
- AB 2054 (Kamlager) – C.R.I.S.E.S. Act: Repeals provisions that authorize the detention of minors in an adult facility, redirecting them to juvenile facilities.
- AB 3052 (Carillo) – Forced Sterilization Compensation: Compensates survivors of forced sterilization through the state’s Victim Compensation Board.
- ICE Out of Prisons Letter: Asks the Governor and the legislature to stop all transfers to ICE upon earned release from CDCR.
- AB 901 (Gipson) – Term Limits Juvenile Probation: Keeps young people from probation contact for the non-criminal behavior of school truancy.
- COVID-19 Housing & Homelessness Budget Request: Asks the Governor and Legislature to allocate adequate resources for CBOs to develop short and long-term housing solutions including reentry housing.
- Involuntary Servitude: Asks legislators to consider sponsoring a constitutional amendment to remove the exceptions clause that permits involuntary servitude for punishment for a crime.
- ACA 6 – The Free The Vote Act: Assembly Constitutional Amendment 6 (ACA6)/AB 646 would add to the ballot a constitutional amendment to restore voting rights to people who have completed their prison sentences but are still on parole.
- California Reentry Commission: Proposes the creation of a California Reentry Commission (CRC), which would leverage state leadership and resources to facilitate the successful transition and reintegration of people returning home from prison and jails.
Editor’s Note: Reggie Thorpe is an incarcerated person in San Quentin State Prison. Charged as a juvenile, he is serving a 50-years-to-life sentence. In a separate letter to AOUON editor Paula Lehman-Ewing, Reggie -- who has an Associate’s Degree in math and science and is taking Calculus 2 this spring -- did the math and determined that, according to the ruling in Plata v. Newsom and Coleman v. Newsom, more than 5,000 incarcerated persons would have to be released to comply with the court’s order to decrease overcrowding. Since recent legislation authored by former California State Senator Loni Hancock (SB 261) has afforded him a parole hearing in 2022 -- instead of 2048, as was originally scheduled -- he is hopeful he can be one of those 5,000.

In his letter he writes: “My crime was murder in broad daylight, in front of several dozen witnesses, who were family and friends of the victim. I used this fact to continue my criminal lifestyle while incarcerated, despite God telling me what I need to do. So one day he asked me, ‘Son, what do you all use to tell time on earth?’ I was confused, literally! I said, ‘Clocks, watches, cellphones, television, etc…’ He responded, ‘No, son,’ and then He asked the question again. Now, I am really confused. This time, He said, ‘You all use the sun. I created the sun, I created day and night. I control time. That 50-years-to-life sentence man gave you is man’s time, not My time. Remember what I did for My servant Joshua?’ (Joshua 10:12-13). The day the sun stood still. (Job 9:7).”

Reggie also included sent a letter to All of Us or None looking at CDCR’s reaction to the coronavirus pandemic. It speaks to the theme of this month’s issue -- involuntary servitude -- because it looks at the situation from a business perspective. But, unlike other businesses, the corrections department is doing nothing to protect its resources.

“Reggie’s original letter refers to “inmates.” This has been changed to “incarcerated persons” in all instances. This is not done out of disrespect to the author. Through the collective knowledge of our community members, we’ve determined this terminology, meant to convey an aspect of rehabilitation, has been used by corrections officers to dehumanize incarcerated persons. The memory of a CO barking “Inmate!” has caused trauma to many of our comrades, proving the term is meant to punish rather than rehabilitate.

Dear AOUON,

I just read an article in Volume 2, Issue 1 April 2020, “Life in the Time of COVID-19.” I believe this is a thorough, well written article. However, as an incarcerated person at San Quentin State Prison, I am looking at this pandemic from a business perspective.

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First and foremost, slavery and mass incarceration are businesses. Human beings are the product and means by which prisons receive revenue from the state and federal government. On the same token, NBA players are the product of team owners and the NBA.

In an interview with Dr. Fauci and Steph Curry, Steph asked why it was so easy for him to receive a test for coronavirus, but it is virtually impossible for people in society who do not show symptoms. I said to myself, “Bro, you are a product which belongs to billionaires. They must do what is necessary to keep you and your family safe and healthy.”

CDCR cannot afford to let COVID-19 spread uncontrollably inside its institutions. Between the lawsuits and bodies lost, their revenue would decline catastrophically. Also, I have an Eighth Amendment right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment. CDCR cannot infringe upon this right because of the coronavirus.

So, in order to protect my product: 1) I would cease all movement of incoming detainees and incarcerated persons; 2) constantly and consistently monitor those who are showing symptoms and/or most at risk of spreading/contracting the coronavirus; 3) afford incarcerated persons their rights to be free from cruel and unusual punishment in ways that are consistent with Gov. Newsom’s orders.

As of today, no one incarcerated in San Quentin State Prison, who has shown symptoms or not, has tested positive for coronavirus. Nevertheless, the only people entering and exiting the prison each day are staff, unless an incarcerated person needs care that is not available inside the prison. So at this point it cannot be considered “negligence” if an incarcerated person gets infected in here, especially if they have not left the institution.

There are further actions that can be taken by CDCR to protect and prevent the coronavirus from entering the institution, but politics, bureaucratic red tape and special interests stand in the way. One thing they can do is start testing staff with that five-minute test that detects COVID-19 everytime they enter the institution. Staff cannot account for the whereabouts of others in their household while they are here with us. Moreover, COVID-19 symptoms may take 2-14 days to surface in those infected. By then, it will be too late for us here at San Quentin.

**Coronavirus Resources**

SUPPORTING DIRECTLY AND SYSTEM-IMPACTED PEOPLE DURING CRISIS
https://www.beyond-prisons.com/covid19

SAFETY MANUALS FOR INDIVIDUALS IN STATE, FEDERAL AND CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES
prisonerswithchildren.org/Coronavirus

COVID-19 MUTUAL AID (NEWARK, NJ)
https://www.allofusornone-northernnj.com/covid-19-newark-mutual-aid
If you’re wondering why a police officer can dig his knee into the neck of a Black man, cut off his oxygen and murder him on camera, if you’re wondering why Black and Brown communities are suffering more acutely than Whites during this pandemic, the answer is not simply that racism still exists in this country. It is that the original system of racism in this country still exists in a very real and very legal way. A moral high ground can never be found when the country’s foundation is crumbling from an unwillingness to shed the weight of its history.

Let’s set aside for a moment the legal argument — that the Emancipation Proclamation pertained to end the practice of slavery in America and that, in 1967, the U.S. ratified the U.N. Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, which commits a nation to the elimination of slavery and involuntary servitude within its borders and obligates it to cooperate with other nations in suppressing those practices.

Let’s simply look at the moral implications: That we live in a society that condones slavery in its foundational legal document.

The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime of the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

In addition to the federal law, 26 state constitutions have enshrined either “slavery” or “involuntary servitude” (or both) as a punishment for crime.

And slavery is not simply an ostensible mandate. It exists in the sweat and labor of men and women throughout the country at this very moment. The audacity of politicians who bemoan actions taken by white supremacists while refusing to amend the constitution — either their state constitution or the U.S. Constitution — is remarkable. Even in progressive states like California, slavery still exists in many forms within the criminal legal system.

As an incarcerated person at Old Folsom, Ali Brit, an organizer at All of Us or None, was given a 10-pound sledge hammer and a steel wheel barrel and forced to mine rock quarries in the heat of the California summer. Curtis Howard, a founding member of All of Us or None San Diego, said he rebelled against work assignments, haunted by his “ancestral lineage,” and was penalized with time added to his already lengthy sentence.

In fact, the idea that work in prison is voluntary is a farce. Heshima Jinsai, who has served 30 years of his sentence and is currently detained at Kern Valley State Prison in California, has worked as a porter for nearly the entirety of his incarceration. He is paid pennies on the dollar, which he donates to comrades in more dire straits financially. In a recent interview with All of Us or None, Heshima said he isn’t incentivized by “good time credits” either.

A drawing by Heshima Jinsai depicting the evolution of slavery into the modern system of criminalization.

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“The incentive is if I don't work, I go to the hole,” he said. “The incentive to work is truly involuntary.”

These “jobs” cannot even qualify as rehabilitation efforts as many of the equivalent positions on the outside require state licenses, licenses many states deny to individuals with conviction histories. In 2019, three men in California’s prison brigade died fighting wildfires that devastated entire towns within the state. They made about $3 per day, plus an additional buck during active emergencies. They worked alongside firefighters earning an average of $91,000 a year before overtime pay and bonuses. It’s unlikely any member of the prison fire brigade will be able to become a firefighter or EMT when they are released because of their conviction history.

There are 70 factories in California’s 33 prisons. Collectively, they bring in $60 million in profit for the prison industrial complex. Since taxpayer dollars cover the majority of the cost to imprison someone, profits made from these factories offset much of the operation costs, meaning administrators and staff can line their pockets with the remainder. Consequently, prison guards in California receive a higher base salary than their counterparts in any other jurisdiction, including the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Kamau Allen, an organizer with Abolish Slavery Colorado whose campaign to amend the Colorado state constitution was successful in 2018, said the motive to increase profits on the backs of an oppressed population is no coincidence.

“The truth is that the language sitting in our constitution is a direct result, and an intentional result, of transferring slavery into the form of incarceration slavery,” Allen said at the May 18 Digital Quest for Democracy. “The fact that one of my family members was incarcerated for 21 years for a crime he did not commit and was forced to work for 25 cents a day is by no mistake.”

In less progressive states, the connection is more obvious: Angola State Prison in Louisiana, Parchman Farm in Mississippi and Cummins Unit in Arkansas are prisons built on former slave plantations. Their labor forces work the same fields as chattel slaves prior to emancipation.

This collision of white supremacy and capitalism is only part of the

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problem, though. To reach the depth of racism that exists in the U.S. today, you have to go a step further, the step Derek Chauvin took when he killed George Floyd with no empathy for taking a human life.

Beyond prison labor, racism, through criminalization, has persisted in its purest form: The belief Black people are subhuman.

Incarcerated people who tattoo themselves in prison are given penalties for “destruction of state property.”

As a college student in Soledad State Prison, Flores A. Forbes, now the Associate Vice President of Strategic Policy and Program Implementation at Columbia University, was told to sign a power of attorney agreement for a Pell Grant, which he needed to complete his education. When Forbes asked why, the administrator told him, “Because you are not a person. You are C72851.”

The systemic dehumanization of Americans through criminalization is, again, deeply rooted in our nation’s history and legal rulings. Nearly a decade after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the Virginia Supreme Court decided in Ruffin v. Commonwealth a convicted felon “has, as a consequence of his crime, not only forfeited his liberty but all his personal rights except those which the law in its humanity affords him. He is for the time being a slave of the state.”

In 1946, the U.S. Supreme Court noted a felony conviction “strips an offender of all civil rights and leaves a shattered character that only a presidential pardon can amend.” (Fiswick v. United States, 329 U.S. 211, 222) In 1970, five years after the Voting Rights Act, 14 states still had some sort of “civil death” statute. Today, civil death still applies to some felonies in both New York and Rhode Island.

The U.S. Supreme Court has failed to set the record straight time and time again, deferring decisions around civil death and collateral consequences to district courts. Most recently, the court denied review of the case of a man serving two life sentences in Rhode Island. Lifers in Rhode Island are subjected to the state’s 1909 civil death statute, which states, “Every person imprisoned in the adult correctional institutions for life shall, with respect to all rights of property, to the bond of matrimony

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and to all civil rights and relations of any nature whatsoever, be deemed to be dead in all respects, as if his or her natural death had taken place at the time of conviction.”

So, in 2010 when Dana Gallop, then a pretrial detainee at the Providence Adult Corrections Institution, was attacked by another prisoner with a razor, the state’s Supreme Court dismissed his suit because he had lost his civil right to exert a legal claim.

Twenty-four states have recognized the harm this kind of language has caused and make no mention of slavery or involuntary servitude in their constitutions whatsoever, with five more scheduled to vote on similar amendments this November. The Colorado campaign in 2018 saw 100 percent of state legislators vote in favor of Amendment A and 65 percent of the voting populace affirm it.

In this moment when it seems the world is burning, it is important to remember what started the fire, so from the ashes a new and more just society may be built. In a letter to All of Us or None, Heshima, who founded Amend the 13th: Abolish Legal Slavery in Amerika Movement, summed up the harm in the existence of slavery in our foundational legal doctrine like this: “The most enduring legacy of destruction and human misery in human history is the legacy of legal slavery in America. Its attendant prejudices and unequal relationships have persisted through every evolution of American productive and social life. It is preserved in ‘law’ and enshrined in the very structure of American institutions, casting its specter of hate and hierarchy across the lives of millions over the course of centuries. From the slave codes, to the Black Codes, to the legal slavery provision of the 13th Amendment and the thousands of ‘civil death’ laws which derive their legal authority there from, America has made a mockery of the concept of ‘freedom and justice for all’ by ensuring it is always denied to some.”

Slavery and the prison industry collide in this 2011 photo. Prisoners place new grave markers at Mormon Island Relocation Cemetery in El Dorado Hills, Calif. The original markers contained offensive racial epithets. Photo credit: U.S. Army/Chris Gray-Garcia

All of Us or None is collecting stories about plea bargaining, police brutality, and other offenses that define the criminal legal system. If you have a story you want to share, please contact AOUON Newspaper Editor Paula Lehman-Ewing: paula@prisonerswithchildren.org

If you’re loved one is incarcerated, they can write their testimony and mail it to: Legal Services for Prisoners with Children c/o Paula Lehman-Ewing, Editor 4400 Market Street Oakland, CA 94608
The strength of our movement is in our stories. Knowing this, All of Us or None Northern New Jersey launched a #FreeThemAll #CompassionateRelease campaign featuring video testimonials about how COVID-19 is impacting our inside membership. Along with their comrades from the New York chapter, members collected letters from people in prison and have been rolling out videos where the letters are read aloud.

“It almost feels as if I’m standing on the railroad tracks, staring down an oncoming locomotive,” wrote a man incarcerated in an East Jersey State Prison. “I see it coming, but I’m unable to move. It’s like I’m powerless to stop the train.”

Other letters talk about being denied the right to protect yourself, being denied basic cleaning products and having unanswered COVID questions and a general lack of information.

Accompanying these grim testimonies is a call to action: That they be shared on social media platforms with a demand that New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy implement significant decarceration policies and sanitation measures. In May, a petition was sent to Gov. Murphy outlining their demands: The release of individuals vulnerable to infection, all individuals within 6 months of completing their sentence, and all individuals held in pretrial detention in New Jersey’s jails. The letter also insisted the state assess whether all detained youth can be safely released to their homes and that all incarcerated individuals are tested for COVID-19.

“We are not calling for the abdication of personal responsibility for those who have caused harm in their communities,” the letter stated. “We instead see the precarious environment in New Jersey’s prisons and jails for the human rights issue that it is. New Jersey formally abolished the death penalty in 2007. Yet, incarceration during a pandemic is a death sentence for many. It would be unjust to condemn the currently incarcerated to death by failing to implement decarceration and stringent sanitation measures with due haste.”

There are 39,000 people behind bars in New Jersey. Forty-four individuals have died of the virus to date.
Chapter Updates

Bakersfield (CA)

Bakersfield Chapter was selected to receive COVID-19 funding for formerly incarcerated people in Kern County. The funds are being used to provide financial relief up to $500 per applicant, to be used for rent/lease assistance, food, utilities, or medical expenses.

Los Angeles/Long Beach (CA)

As co-sponsors of SB 144, a bill that would limit the assessment and collection of various fines and fees for people in county jail, representatives from AOUON LA spoke truth to power at DQ4D about how these penalties cause. Members also attended a Mother's Day protest at the Lynwood county jail to demand the release of mothers to their children. They also participated in a #LetThemFree protest at the California Institution for Women in Chino.

Sacramento

The Sacramento chapter has officially opened the doors of its new office space! Members worked tirelessly in May to continue work around reentry housing and were an essential part of the outreach and planning committees for Digital Quest for Democracy.

San Diego (CA)

San Diego has continued its hotel voucher program, providing housing for people being released from prison and jail to reduce overcrowding in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Chapter founder Curtis Howard also participated in the May 18 Digital Quest for Democracy, sharing his experience with involuntary servitude in a legislative session proposing a constitutional amendment to strike that language from state law.

Idaho

The Idaho chapter is planning for in-person membership meetings again in July. They are beginning outreach to grow their membership and are re-engaging current members. The chapter has also started brainstorming plans for its community give back in December. On the policy side, co-founder Mary Failing has been in contact with district representatives to discuss ways to work collaboratively on legislation next session.

Central Illinois

The Peoria chapter is down to the wire with its “Bring Brian Back” campaign. Chapter founder General Parker has compiled a “Social Bio” packet for attorney MiAngel Cody, founder of the Decarceration Collective, who is filing a motion for sentence reduction under the First Step Act in federal court. If successful, the issue will come full circle for General and the Central Illinois chapter: General was one of about a dozen people chosen by Van Jones and Cut 50 to lobby Congress to pass the First Step Act. Brian Burnside inspired the chapter's work in this area.

New Jersey

In addition to its #FreeThemAll video campaign, the New Jersey chapter has been sending its inside membership petitions for release forms with instructions on how to fill them out and where to send them. The chapter was also awarded a $5,000 grant, which it used to add $25 to commissary/canteen accounts of each inside member. This will also allow them to be able to call home if their family support was affected by COVID. The chapter also provided face masks and launched a mutual aid initiative for incarcerated individuals and their loved ones so that they could receive an additional $250 of support.

Durham (NC)

Since COVID-19 started, the Durham chapter has been doing rolling protests at local jails as well as state and federal prisons. Members have partnered with Communities In Partnership (C.I.P.) to provide those in need with fresh fruits and vegetables biweekly. They also deliver hot meals every Friday to elders in the community.

San Antonio (TX)

The San Antonio chapter is expanding the reach of All of Us or None in the state of Texas, with plans to start 3 new chapters. They are also working on preparing bills for the upcoming legislative session, including a repeal of fines and fees as well as a youth diversion program.

Get in touch! Find contact information for your local chapter on the last page
**BILL WATCH**

*Editor’s note: As a result of the pandemic, many state legislatures are paring down their bills. While some criminal justice bill are still in motion, the majority of bills being heard by lawmakers focus on COVID-19 relief and recovery. All of Us or None and our fiscal sponsor organizations continue to advocate for the reforms we see as necessary, this month’s “Bill Watch” will only reflect currently active bills.*

**CALIFORNIA**
- **Voting Rights for People On Parole (McCarty) ACA 6 / AB 646** would approve the right for people on parole to vote and pave the way for a constitutional amendment which would be put to California voters in November 2020.
- **Debt Free California (Mitchell) SB 144** would build on the recent decisions of individual counties (such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Alameda) to end the collection of certain court and probation fees by repealing state law authorizing specified criminal justice fees.

**IDAHO**
- **Clean Slate (Rubel and Lent) [number pending]** would allow individuals with felony convictions for nonviolent and nonsexual crimes to petition the courts to seal their public records. Individuals applying for sealed records would need to have served their whole sentence and have not reoffended in the three years following their release.

**ILLINOIS**
- **Electronic Monitoring Reform (Peters) HB1115** would require data-driven justification for use of electronic monitoring in order to limit its use to cases where it is actually effective.
- **Right to Vote (Ford) HB4377/HJRCA33**, a bill and constitutional amendment, would ensure incarcerated people would be able to vote.

**KENTUCKY**
- **Kentucky Voting Rights (Higdon) SB62** proposes to amend Section 145 of the Constitution of Kentucky to grant persons convicted of a felony other than a sex offense, a violent offense, or an offense against a child, the right to vote five years after completion of sentence; submit to the voters for ratification or rejection.

continued on Next Page
Missouri

- Fresh Start Act (Koenig) SB 647 would require that no person shall be disqualified from pursuing, practicing, or engaging in any occupation for which a license is required solely or in part because of a prior conviction of a crime, unless the crime for which an applicant was convicted directly relates to the duties and responsibilities for the licensed occupation.
- Death Penalty With Mental Illness (Hannegan) HB 1756 would prohibit the execution of any person found to have suffered from a serious mental illness at the time of the offense for which they are accused.

New York

- Fair Parole (Hoylman) S 2144 & (Rivera) S 497A aim to reform the parole system. S 2144 would make incarcerated people 55 years old immediately eligible for parole if they have served at least 15 years in prison. S 497A would limit the parole board’s assessment to the risk one poses to the public, rather than the seriousness of the offense for which they were convicted.

Pennsylvania

- Probation Reform (Williams) SB 14 would reform how long Pennsylvanians stay on probation and the time served in prison for probation violations. It also specifies that a court may not impose a sentence of probation consecutive to another sentence of probation.

Washington

- Medication-Assisted Treatment (Zeiger) SB 6585 would encourage the use of FDA-approved drugs to treat detainees with opioid addiction in county jails, including methadone, buprenorphine, and naltrexone.

New Jersey

- Reentry Support Hotline (Verrelli) A 813 would require the establishment and maintenance of a 24-hour prisoner reentry support hotline. The hotline, operated by certified peer recovery specialists, would receive and respond to calls from formerly incarcerated persons seeking support in reentry following release from custody.
- No For-Profit Prisons (Verrelli) A 816 would prohibit DOC and other public entities from contracting with for-profit, private correctional facilities.

North Carolina

- The Second Chance Act (Britt, Daniel and McKissick) H 874 would set up automatic expungement for people who are found not guilty or have charges against them dismissed after July 1, 2020, and allow people to petition for the expunction of nonviolent misdemeanor and felony charges after a period of good behavior.

If you’re interested in becoming involved in policy change for your state, contact your local AOUON chapter.

(See last page for details.)
By London Croudy

For nearly a decade, daydreams are what kept me going. I dreamt of what it was going to feel like the day it was my turn to be released from prison, and all the things that I wanted to do with my life. These visions played over and over in my head like clockwork, pulling me through rough days; motivating me; reminding me I was worth something. I shared all my visions with God and pleaded with Him: “Please,” I’d pray, “let my captivity have a purpose that is greater than me.”

I went to prison when I was 24 and was released at the age of 32. So much had changed over the course of eight years, including me. For eight years I planned, prayed and groomed myself for the day that I would reenter society. I was determined to get out and live my life with purpose, to make sure I would be a part of the solution to the injustice I had experienced as an incarcerated woman. I vowed to be a vessel, to do whatever I could to help those who were still trapped behind those walls, and to be a light, a helping hand, to help someone find a different path than the one I’d followed. I didn’t really have a solid plan on how I was going to carry these things out. I just had prayer, a will and a lot of stored-up pain, hurt and emotion that pushed me to be the woman that I was determined to become.

When the day came that I finally walked out from behind those walls, my family was in the parking lot waiting for me. I remember having this expectation that I was going to be uncontrollably emotional, like balloons would rise out of nowhere into the sky, maybe a band would be playing, a celebration that I was now a free woman. This was one vision that was not meant to be. I exchanged a few awkward hugs with my family members, realizing in those moments how much I had disconnected from my family over the course of eight years. Every prison
I had been to -- with the exception of the four-month stay at Dublin at the end of my sentence -- was extremely far from all my family members. The calls were expensive and limited, so in order for me to cope in prison I detached myself from the outside world. Now I felt like a stranger.

The ride to the halfway house was full of anxiety for me. I was car sick, there was traffic and I only had 45 minutes to get there. After the intake process I was given deadlines and a “To Do” list. I remember the room that I was assigned had the same metal beds as prison, with a thin mat similar to the one that I had slept on the night before.

I remember thinking, “Now what?” I was in a city I hadn't lived in for about 20 years. I felt like a fish out of water, but I was determined.

Several days later, Chihiro Wimbush, a documentarian I corresponded with the last two years of my sentence, sent me an email with the name and number of someone who might be able to provide me with resources. The woman who answered my call gave me an address and told me to come down to the office the next day. The address was a 45-minute walk from the halfway house. I was used to jogging a minimum of five miles a day so a 45-minute walk would be a breeze. Plus, it would give me an opportunity to see my new hometown.

I wasn’t yet aware of how traumatizing my incarceration had been. As I walked to the office, all the movement going on around me, crossing the street, people yelling out their cars to me, was a bit much for my first alone outing. Exhausted and a bit of a mess, I walked into the Freedom and Movement Center, welcomed by a bold, black fist on the wall with the words “All of Us or None.”

I told the receptionist that I was there to see Hamdiya, the woman I’d spoken to on the phone. A Muslim sister approached me with a smile and said, “I’m Hamdiya.” I smiled back at her, but then I broke into tears. In an instant, she and two other women took me by the hand and led me to their conference room. They hugged me and assured me that it was going to be okay. Their strength and genuine care made me smile. I explained to them that what I thought would be an easy walk for me was a little traumatizing and they understood: They had been there, too.

An hour later, I was skinning and grinning with an application in my hand for the Elder Freeman fellowship. I became a fellow in January 2019 and I've used that opportunity to make many of my visions come true. I shed light on injustice in a weekly panel I host, “One Community, One Mic.” Most importantly, I am able to see now how my survival of prison serves a purpose: It motivates me to never give up this fight.
All of Us
Or None

Slave, who is it that shall free you?
Those in deepest darkness lying.
Comrade, only these can see you
Only they can hear you crying.
Comrade, only slaves can free you.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.
One alone his lot can’t better.
Either gun or fetter.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.

You who hunger, who shall feed you?
If it’s bread you would be carving,
Come to us, we too are starving.
Come to us and let us lead you.
Only hungry men can feed you.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.
One alone his lot can’t better.
Either gun or fetter.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.

Beaten man, who shall avenge you?
You, on whom the blows are falling,
Hear your wounded brothers calling.
Weakness gives us strength to lend you.
Come to us, we shall avenge you.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.
One alone his lot can’t better.
Either gun or fetter.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.

Who, oh wretched one, shall dare it?
He who can no longer bear it.
Counts the blows that arm his spirit.
Taught the time by need and sorrow,
Strikes today and not tomorrow.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.
One alone his lot can’t better.
Either gun or fetter.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)