

# Prisons and public health: Gov. Cuomo must let out thousands or many will die

By Susan M. Reverby  
New York Daily News |  
Mar 27, 2020 | 5:23 PM

The Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, N.Y. (Mark Lennihan/AP)

Many are applauding Gov. Cuomo for the honesty and emotionalism of his daily briefings on COVID-19. I am sure he wants his legacy to be that he saved the lives of thousands of New Yorkers. But if he doesn't act on clemency right now for the state's aging prison population, who are so vulnerable to COVID-19, he may well be remembered instead more like Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, who was responsible for the deaths of 43 incarcerated men and correctional officers killed when he ordered state troopers to shoot into the prison yard at Attica in 1971.

No matter what your politics or positions on law and order, we need to think about releasing the most at-health-risk incarcerated people now. And I mean now. Every day counts.

This is not a "criminal justice" issue, it's a public health issue. Prisons are the weakest link in the public health system. Housing people tightly together where they have to pay to get access to extra soap is asking for a pandemic to spread. The incarcerated cannot practice social distancing. They cannot always wash their hands. They cannot order alcohol and aloe vera on line to make hand sanitizer. They cannot exercise six feet away from one another. They cannot decide where to be, where to sleep, where to walk, where to eat.

The virus has already spread in Rikers Island and other jails. Now we hear reports from the prisons, where people serve much longer sentences, indicating the virus is invading those spaces as well. It begins with staff bringing COVID-19 in on their shifts, then the incarcerated people they had contact with being left living in large groups together, in cell blocks, sharing toilets and sinks, unable to find protection from the onslaught.

In the early 20th century, the Atlanta Constitution's editor reminded his readers that "Germs Know No Color Line." Similarly, the COVID-19 virus does not care if you are rich or poor, black or white, a social democrat or a libertarian, on the street or in a jail. It just wants to replicate and any available body will do. The differences by race and class only may mean some have access to the testing others do it.

The prison health-care system, always honoring security over health-care needs, cannot cope with COVID-19 prevention nor care. Cutting off family visits, as the state has done, doesn't help, because it is correctional officers and other staff who have brought the virus behind the bars. They could not work from home. Allowing the use of hand sanitizer is a pitifully small gesture, too little too late, and by many reports, still not even a reality. If you think we have shortages in our fancy hospitals, imagine what it is like in the infirmaries in the jails and prisons. Consider what generations of underfunding health care in the carceral system has meant, and what this means when incarcerated people, prison health workers and professionals get sick.

Mass incarceration has filled the prisons with more and more aging prisoners. These women and men are not a danger to anyone, and they have as a group the lowest risk of committing a new offense and the highest rate of serious underlying medical concerns. In New York State, the Release Aging People in Prison campaign has been fighting for a long time to get these elders, no longer at risk for recidivism, to be

let out. All over the country governors and prison administrations are writing legislation or considering clemency for elders. New York State could be a leader, but only if Cuomo acts now.

I wish it were true that the prison health care system could care for those they are responsible for. It cannot. I just finished writing a book about an American doctor who only survived his cancers in prison because he knew more than those trying to take care of him, and had lots of outside support to advocate for him. When he was imprisoned at Marion, the federal prison in Southern Illinois, he was the only licensed doctor there. That's right: The physician who was supposed to take care of him had gone to medical school, but never passed a state exam. This was in the 1980s, but there is little evidence that with our penurious attitude toward the incarcerated that much has changed.

So email, call, text or write your legislators, mayors, attorney general and especially Gov. Cuomo. Do not let the prisons and jails be the next hotspot that harms us all. We have to do this now.

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