

Letter for Individual Jewish Organizations:

To be addressed to governors, heads of state department of corrections, local officials (mayors, county executives, and local corrections officials administering jails).

For State Prisons: Dear Governor [Last Name] and [Commissioner or Head of State Department of Corrections],

OR

For Local Jails: Dear Mayor [Last Name]/County Executive/Manager [Last Name] and [Head of Local Department of Corrections]

On behalf of [Name of Your Organization], [short mission statement or organizational description], we write to urge you to act immediately to protect the thousands of men and women in our state jails and prisons right now whose lives are at stake due to COVID-19.

Prisons and jails are especially susceptible to rampant disease spread: close quarters, unsanitary conditions, subpar medical care, poor ventilation, and individuals in close, frequent contact. Over 2.1 million people are behind bars in the United States, including more than 500,000 people who are awaiting trial. COVID-19 is already rapidly spreading in these confined settings, which are poorly equipped to deal with a volatile epidemic. If not addressed swiftly, this will turn into a humanitarian disaster.

The Torah teaches that we are created in “the Image of God” (*Btzelem Elohim*). This core belief is an ethical mandate for how we must treat and care for our fellow human beings. We implore you to enact policies and procedures right now which uphold the dignity of every person and protect incarcerated people and staff in prisons and jails.

We join together to ask that [State/City/County]:

Reduce the numbers of people who are incarcerated. This can be done effectively by decreasing the numbers of people who enter prisons and jails and by accelerating the release of those who pose little risk to public safety.

- Eliminate or substantially reduce the number of people arrested for petty crimes;
- Streamline the justice system treatment to avoid unnecessary layers of human to human contact (e.g., through issuance of citations rather than the standard intake and associated judicial process);
- Eliminate or suspend cash bail for arrested individuals;
- Release those in jail merely because they did not have the resources to post money (or bonds) for bail;
- Use existing legal mechanisms to release from prison those who have served nearly all of their sentences, unless doing so would, on a case-by-case basis, cause a danger to society;
- Use existing legal mechanisms to release from prison those over the age of 60 or who are otherwise in a vulnerable population group, unless doing so would, on a case-by-case basis, cause a danger to society; and

- Increase access to testing and screening of inmates and staff, especially those who are entering and leaving facilities. Test those being released to ensure that those who are already positive for the virus can be directed to appropriate treatment.

Provide resources to protect those who cannot be released.

- Those incarcerated should be provided with the means to maintain good personal hygiene, through sufficient access to soap and water and other sanitizing products, including ensuring access to such means at all times when non-incarcerated individuals would be engaging in personal hygiene;
- Testing must be available on a broad scale to ensure that incarcerated individuals and prison staff know when they have contracted the virus just as they would in other environments.
- Infected individuals should be isolated and treated in the same manner and at the same level as those who are not incarcerated
- Guards and other personnel should be protected (through their own personal hygiene and through personal protective equipment where that is necessary) and should stay home if they are sick without fear of loss of income;
- Provide sufficient medical treatment;
- Provide free unlimited phone calls, video conferencing, and email for all incarcerated people who can no longer receive visitors; and
- Enable non-profit organizations to work with prison officials (e.g., chaplains) to assemble and provide hygiene kits (containing sanitizer and/or soap) to be used by those who are incarcerated.

Eliminate, or at least suspend, the barriers to government benefits and services for those previously incarcerated.

- Particularly during this crisis, formerly incarcerated, including, but not limited to those who are being released under the conditions proposed here, must be able to find adequate, affordable housing; employment if they are able to be employed; and medical and other treatment (including addiction services); and
- In order to expand the resources available to those who are being released from incarceration, governments should enable nonprofits, including religious institutions, to provide spaces for reentry services, including, as necessary, shelter for those who would otherwise be homeless.

It is imperative that you create, release publicly, implement, and enforce a policy, vetted by public health officials for handling COVID-19 within each facility. Viruses do not respect prison walls. An outbreak anywhere is a danger everywhere. We must act now to protect the lives of all [people from state, e.g., Californians].

Sincerely,

[Head of Organization]

[Chair of Organization or Other Lay Leader]

