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Updates for April 21st

5 Apr - FBI Opened Terrorism Investigations Into Nonviolent Palestinian Solidarity Group, Documents Reveal

This article exposes the FBI's multiple terrorism investigations into a nonviolent Palestinian solidarity organization, predicated on First Amendment activity, such as anti-capitalist philosophy.

MORE:

by Chip Gibbons (*The Intercept*)

In 2006, St. Louis-based activist and academic Mark Chmiel received a message on his answering machine from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI wanted to talk to Chmiel about trip three years ago that he and other St. Louis activists took with the International Solidarity Movement to the West Bank, in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. When Chmiel's attorney reached out to the FBI, they did not respond.

Chmiel later wrote that he was motivated to travel to the West Bank by Palestinians' calls for volunteers, international organizations' inability to deal with the occupation, and his own country's complicity in Israel's actions. The International Solidarity Movement, or ISM, which would be Chmiel's vehicle, encourages international volunteers to come to the occupied territories and engage in nonviolent direct action against the occupation. During the delegation Chmiel was on, Israel soldiers opened fire on a Palestinian protest and injured one of the St. Louis activists. An aging Holocaust survivor who was also part of the delegation was subjected to a humiliating and invasive search when departing from Israel.

These deprivations of rights experienced by Americans at the hands of Israeli authorities, however, were not what interested the FBI. Instead, the FBI was conducting an international terrorism investigation into Chmiel and another activist from the delegation (*The Intercept* reached out to the second activist, who asked that their name be withheld).

Neither Chmiel nor the general public ever learned of the official terrorism investigation until now. Its existence was revealed by hundreds of pages of FBI files about the International Solidarity Movement obtained by *The Intercept* through a public records request. The documents make references to other investigations from FBI field offices around the country involving ISM or its members, but many of the files are so heavily redacted that it is impossible to tell what they refer to. In at least some instances, the FBI appears to be monitoring the political activity of ISM members or at the very least noting ISM affiliation of subjects of FBI monitoring.

It is clear, however, that the FBI conducted at least two major investigations into ISM. In addition to the international terrorism investigation into the two St. Louis activists, the FBI's Los Angeles Field Office initiated a domestic security investigation into ISM as an organization.

Nothing in the documents suggests any of these investigations ever resulted in criminal charges. Instead, the documents reveal sprawling investigations involving FBI field offices in multiple states and the national headquarters, as well as local law enforcement. FBI agents resorted not only to confidential informants and physical surveillance, but a scandal-prone unit formed in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks accessed the phone records of at least one activist. In both investigations, the FBI relied heavily on biased right-wing publications making fantastical claims of questionable veracity.

The investigations, the documents show, cast a wide net. Other groups making nonviolent objections to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories were named as associates of ISM; their board members and

other affiliations were listed in the documents simply owing to glancing associations with the group under investigation.

Throughout the documents, the political beliefs of ISM members and other Palestinian solidarity activist were treated as though they were synonymous with terrorism. The approach is of a piece with the FBI's long history of using its intelligence and national security powers to track domestic dissent.

"These cases demonstrate the FBI's unwillingness to distinguish non-violent civil disobedience protesting government policy from terrorism," Michael German, a former FBI agent and current fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice, who reviewed the documents, told *The Intercept*. "The first" — the Los Angeles probe — "shows the FBI doesn't even follow its own rules in opening Terrorism Enterprise Investigations. And the second" — in St. Louis — "shows the FBI's use of tools designed to target foreign enemies against Americans exercising their First Amendment rights."

The documents obtained by *The Intercept* were released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed in February 2015. The FBI, however, only began handing over the files in the fall of 2019 after litigation. While the FBI purports to have processed all documents exclusively in its possession, it maintains that it located other records that originated with or mention other government agencies and declined to release them. (The files also reference a separate earlier probe, based out of Los Angeles, into four individuals instead of ISM as an organization. Despite the allusions to this investigation in the documents the FBI sent in response to *The Intercept*'s FOIA request, no documents directly from the investigation were included in the released materials.)

For ISM members, the episode is a surreal view into the priorities of America's premier law enforcement and domestic intelligence agency. "The fact that ISM was under this kind of extensive investigation is ridiculous and a complete waste of taxpayer money," ISM co-founder Huwaida Arraf told *The Intercept*. "ISM has always been open and transparent about who we are, what we do, and what we stand for, which is purportedly what this country stands for — freedom and human rights."

St. Louis Investigation

In March 2004, the FBI's St. Louis Field Office launched its international terrorism investigation of two local ISM activists. Despite spending two years investigating the pair, the FBI ultimately concluded neither one of them had broken any U.S. laws or posed any threat to national security. Handwritten notes scrawled in the margins of both FBI files read "no leads no evidence." The FBI concluded the two were merely pro-Palestinian activists.

Why the FBI ever thought the activists were guilty of anything other than First Amendment-protected activity remains unclear. The stated reasoning for the investigation is that the pair were members of ISM and that they traveled to the occupied Palestinian territories with the group. Yet the files indicate multiple St. Louis activists went on an ISM delegation to the Palestinian territories; why only the two were singled out is never explained.

This association with ISM appears to have been enough to warrant the probe. Local FBI agents had met with an "asset" of "unknown reliability" who informed them about ISM. Agents followed up by looking up ISM in the FBI's automated case system, which was an electronic system used to maintain files about the FBI's investigative, intelligence, and administrative activities. Whatever records they found — agents described the search as "cursory" — led them to link ISM to Hamas, the Islamist Palestinian resistance group that is classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. But the links rested on thin reeds: The agents reported that "some persons who claim affiliation with the ISM are suspected of having loyalties, or

sympathizing with Hamas or other more radical pro-Palestinian groups. ISM claims to be a peaceful movement that utilizes nonviolent direct action protest tactics to drive Israel from the Palestinian areas.”

The result of this purported association of some unnamed individuals within ISM’s orbits with international terrorists — as well as supposed links to domestic anarchists — the St. Louis Field Office took it upon themselves to investigate the two activists to “assess any possible terrorism links,” launching the terrorism investigation.

Despite turning up no real evidence of any wrongdoing, the FBI was able to pull the phone records of at least one of the two activists. According to the documents obtained by *The Intercept*, the FBI’s Communications Analysis Unit processed Chmiel’s phone records and found “one telephone number in CAU analysis of Chmiel’s phone was linked to a highly classified CIA cable.”

The FBI’s Communications Analysis Unit, which was created after the September 11 attacks to support terrorism investigations by analyzing phone records, was heavily criticized during this period by the Office of Inspector General for obtaining phone records without first getting either a grand jury subpoena or what is known as a national security letter.

How the Communications Analysis Unit obtained Chmiel’s phone records or what justification was provided is unknown. In the document that mentioned links to the CIA cable, the preceding paragraph mentioned a grand jury subpoena, but redactions make it impossible to know what the subpoena dealt with. (The second activist’s file also contains a redacted reference to a grand jury subpoena.) The FBI was never an intended recipient of the CIA cable and the CIA proved slow to share its contents with the FBI, the document says.

While the CIA foot-dragging was used to put off closing one activist’s case even after other had been closed, eventually the agents relented. “For this reason further delay of this closing communication is not deemed feasible,” the file said, referring to internal cable that would officially end the probe. The case was closed on March 21, 2006.

Los Angeles Investigation

A mere three months after the St. Louis investigation was opened, the FBI’s Los Angeles Field office launched its own investigation into ISM. This time, it was a so-called Terrorist Enterprise Investigation — a type of probe reserved for groups that seek political or social change through violence or force — that would last until 2005.

Throughout the documents related to the investigation, the FBI again conflated political beliefs with terrorism. According to FBI documents outlining the justification for the probe, ISM members “predisposition to anti-capitalist and anti-global philosophy” — an apparent reference to the anti-globalization movement — “coupled with their sympathetic views on the Palestinian cause gives rise to the concern that ISM members can be directed, coerced, or through their own volition, be the purveyors of acts of terrorism.”

As part of their investigation, the Los Angeles Field Office developed confidential informants, circulated articles from a right-wing website, and tracked the domestic arrests of ISM members for civil disobedience, according to the documents. When profiling “key ISM leaders/associates,” the FBI took care to note the activists’ nationalities and religious backgrounds, recording that certain individuals were “Palestinian,” “Palestinian-American,” or “born from a Jewish family.”

Despite the murky justifications for the investigation, information about the probe made its way around federal and local agencies. Though the LA Field Office initiated the investigation, officials at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., were both aware of and supportive of the probe, according to the documents.

In November 2004, an FBI counterterrorism unit scheduled a meeting to take place at headquarters to “assess the current investigative activity to date, share intelligence, and to coordinate and formulate strategy for future investigation of the ISM.” The Washington-based counterterrorism unit requested the Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, and Texas field offices all send representatives to the meeting. It’s not clear from the documents released by the FBI whether the meeting took place or what came of it. Many details of the meeting are redacted in the FBI documents, including one entirely redacted entity that agents are to meet with as part of the investigation.

The FBI sent information about the purpose of the meeting to a legal attaché — the term of art for FBI offices stationed in embassies abroad. The FBI has 63 such overseas offices, including a Tel Aviv office that covers Israel and the Palestinian territories. The location of the legal attaché on the correspondence about the ISM meeting was redacted on the grounds that releasing that information “would disclose techniques and procedures for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions” — though such information is not removed from publicly released documents as a matter of course.

In her statement to *The Intercept*, Arraf, ISM co-founder, noted that ISM was frequently in touch with diplomatic outposts in the Middle East. “In the occupied Palestinian territory,” she said, “we were, and continue to be, in touch with embassies and consulates, including that of the United States.”

The LA investigation into ISM also touched offices beyond those at the Washington meeting. During the investigation, agents in Chicago; Springfield, Illinois; Boston; Minneapolis; Atlanta; Richmond, Virginia; Cleveland; Houston; San Francisco; and elsewhere all followed leads, gathered evidence, and in at least on case conducted physical surveillance. In a number of instances, local police aided these efforts.

Four months after the investigation was opened, the FBI files mention for the first time that the probe centered on claims that ISM members were “conspiring to violate neutrality laws through direct actions against the Israeli government for its occupation of Palestine and to commit other criminal acts within the U.S.”

This invocation of the Neutrality Act in the LA investigation is illustrative of the law’s controversial history of selective enforcement. Originally passed in 1794 to prohibit private citizens from engaging in military expeditions against nations the U.S. is at peace with, the law remains on the books and has been enforced as recently as 2016. It has, however, not been neutrally applied. Controversially, the U.S. government refused to apply the law to the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 or the 1980s Contra war to overthrow Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. Attempts to strike down neutrality act convictions based on its blatant selective enforcement, however, have been rejected by courts.

The FBI’s contorted reliance on this law to justify investigating nonviolent political action in support of Palestinian human rights is line with this history of politically convenient selective enforcement.

The Wide Net

The FBI’s LA investigation was also based on a claim that ISM activists “have shown a loose association with foreign terrorist organizations, such as Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Islamic Jihad activists” — referring to a host of armed Palestinian groups considered to be terrorists by the

U.S and Israel. Associations with domestic groups were also wrapped in: The case file cites ISM's supposed connection to the Ruckus Society, a civil society group that shares skills about nonviolent direct action, as a justification for the LA investigation. A document dated December 13, 2004, says the Ruckus Society itself is "currently the subject of a Terrorist Enterprise Investigation out of San Francisco." The FBI documents identify the Ruckus Society as an "anarchist" group, frequently using the term interchangeably with domestic terrorism group.

A key source for the FBI's claim that ISM had loose associations with foreign terrorist organizations appears to be FrontPage Magazine, a website run by the far-right David Horowitz Freedom Center that frequently launches broadsides against pro-Palestinian activists. According to the South Poverty Law Center, FrontPage "has become a platform for publishing a plethora of far-right and anti-Muslim writers and commentators." The December 13, 2004, memo on the investigation cites to two separate FrontPage articles.

In addition to drawing on loose allegations of associations of ISM with foreign terrorist organizations to justify the investigation, the FBI also tracked ISM's own domestic associations.

The Los Angeles Field Office noted a "strong association" between the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker activist group, and the ISM." Later in the case file, it is noted that ISM often fundraises with "other Islamic organizations" — though ISM has no religious affiliation. The case file contains unfounded claims that Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition; Stop U.S. Tax-funded Aid to Israel Now; and Palestine Solidarity Movement are alternative names for ISM, as opposed to separate organizations who work for a similar cause.

One special agent, according to files, also discovered on the internet that a member of ISM was also a member of the U.S. Campaign to End Israeli Occupation, a group now known as the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights. The special agent detailed information that appeared on the U.S. Campaign's website about the group's political views and listed the names and organizational affiliations of all the campaign's board members. The FBI didn't need to go beyond the U.S. Campaign's website to gather this information.

While the investigations could be viewed as harmless, since they ultimately failed to turn up any evidence of terrorism, but they are in line with a dark side of the FBI's history. ISM turned out to be exactly what it said it was — entirely nonviolent — yet the FBI still justified its probes through paranoid views of political associations. It wasn't just that the federal government was monitoring political speech, the FBI treated certain forms of speech as evidence of terrorism. Supposed opinions of ISM members on political economy make them likely to become terrorists. It is taken for granted that associating with anarchists is akin to associating with terrorists.

It seems the FBI's investigation resulted in little more than thousands of pages of documents that did little other than to make the FBI itself perhaps the greatest threat, by spying on First Amendment-protected speech. Today, with the knowledge that he was under investigation, Chmiel reflected on the the FBI's history of spying on social justice activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and how the targeting of such activism is ongoing. "In Dr. King's time, surveillance was justified in terms of alleged Communist influence; in recent years, surveillance has been justified by alleged association with terrorists," Chmiel said. "In both cases, U.S. citizens were employing nonviolent action to confront injustice and oppression."

6 Apr - High Court Declines Case of Imam Jamil Al-Amin

The Supreme Court is declining to take the case of Imam Jamil Al-Amin, fka H. Rap Brown, framed for killing a Georgia sheriff's deputy in 2000. As with all corporate media, please read the following with a critical eye.

MORE:

As is usual, the justices didn't comment Monday in turning away Brown's case. Brown had argued his constitutional rights were violated at trial.

Brown converted to Islam and now goes by the name Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. He gained prominence more than 50 years ago as a Black Panthers leader and was at one point the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

In 2002, Al-Amin was convicted of murder in the death of Fulton County sheriff's Deputy Ricky Kinchen and the wounding of Kinchen's partner, Deputy Aldranon English. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Al-Amin had argued that a prosecutor violated his right not to testify by directly questioning him during closing arguments in a sort of mock cross-examination.

6 Apr - New Recording Benefiting ABCF Warchest

The subgenre of music is called cybergrind, the artist is officegrinder, and all proceeds from the 19 track, COVID-19 inspired EP benefit the ABCF warchest program. BUY IT NOW!!!

MORE:

officegrinder.bandcamp.com/album/covid-19-ep

All proceeds from this EP will go to benefit political prisoners. Recorded entirely on the artist's phone during social distancing.

7 Apr - A Prisoner's Experience Behind Bars During COVID-19

We are delivering as much pandemic information as seems relevant, while trying to maintain some sense of brevity. Below is the latest from Jeremy Hammond, locked up in transfer in a county jail in Oklahoma.

MORE:

Federal prisoners transferring through the Oklahoma City "con air" route usually spend a short time at the Oklahoma City Federal Transit Center, but because it is temporarily closed due to COVID-19, everybody coming in on the planes is being leased out to the local Grady County jail. Because the federal Bureau of Prisons instituted a nationwide lockdown, they are now telling us no planes are going out, leaving several hundred of us stranded at this raggedy jail where conditions are abysmal and woefully inadequate to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Conditions at county jails are often scandalous, and it is particularly egregious here at Grady County. They treat us like zoo animals, packing us into these dirty dorms with no air or sunlight. We are stacked in triple bunks thirty people deep to a 1736 square-foot dorm, allowing us only 27.8 square feet per person, not including the two toilets and shower. The food is of a terrible quality and low quantity, often served cold: baloney sandwiches every day, no fruits, no vegetarian options. There are no books to read, no radio to listen to, no educational or religious programming, leaving us with nothing to do.

They justify these harsh conditions by saying we do not normally spend more than a week or two here until our flight out. But considering that we are stuck here because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a

desperate need for changes. I've asked about the six-foot social distancing rule and sent requests saying that we need masks, latex gloves, and sanitizers. Despite both the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control recommending hand sanitizers containing at least 60% alcohol to kill the virus for when hand washing isn't a viable alternative, and the CDC now recommending face masks to help slow the spread of the virus, the staff won't give us any hand sanitizers because we would "abuse it" and, as for the rest of the items, they only say, "We don't have these items. The six-foot rule doesn't apply to jail."

Grady County has publicly stated that there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19, however when asked, they admitted that they have only administered one test. They say they "screen everybody", but, in actuality, all they have done is take our temperature one time upon arrival. They constantly rotate people into different units, never leaving a unit not filled to capacity, increasing the possibility of cross contamination.

When I was moved to another unit, there were several people noticeably sick, coughing and sneezing. Within two days, nearly all of the thirty people in our unit – including myself – got sick. Numerous people go to sick call every day, at a cost of \$8 per visit, and are given only Mucinex and antihistamines. We're being told that it is either allergies or the common cold, and that they don't do COVID-19 tests unless there are strong symptoms of dry cough and fever. Even then, we would have to pay for the test ourselves. They have joked that the entire fourth floor (eight units of thirty people) have the cold, and although it does seem likely that what our unit has is just a common cold, it is alarming how fast and completely it spread because of our close quarters and lack of sanitation. If the virus does get in here, we wouldn't stand a chance.

The general griminess of the jail only exacerbates the potential for disaster. We get two sets of clothes upon entry and they only wash one set of clothes once a week. The clothes are all used and filthy, coming back from laundry smelling terrible. The blankets and towels are covered with fuzzies and little hairs. We wash our clothes in the shower and sink and hang them to dry on our bunks and clothes lines we hang everywhere. Every single morning, the cops yell at us to take them down, as if they have nothing more important to do, and refuse to turn on the power to the television until we take them down. The jail does not wash the mattresses before reissuing them to new prisoners; the kitchen workers do not wear hair nets and beard guards when serving our trays, and have repeatedly been observed sneezing and wiping their noses. The plumbing often clogs; only one shower works, and it blasts scalding hot water, and the drain is messed up so there is standing water. The roof leaks when it rains outside, dripping water onto the day room tables and chairs. They blast the air conditioning (even when it was 32 degrees outside) perhaps thinking that it would slow the spread of disease. They do not sell multivitamins on commissary, leaving us without proper nutrition to strengthen our immune systems.

The situation is worsened by the uncertainty as to how long we will be languishing here in transit limbo. We do not have access to counselors, case managers, wardens, or anyone from the Bureau of Prisons to answer any questions or deal with people's upcoming releases or eligibility for early home confinement due to the CARES Act.

We know that this is a trying time for everybody, but prisoners' lives should not be any less of a priority than the lives of those outside. Some have ignorantly speculated that we are somehow safer from the pandemic because we are locked down, but considering the closed quarters and unsanitary conditions, we are actually at an increased risk, and have no direct control over our fate. All of us would prefer to take our chances in the free world than be sitting ducks in these gulags. Despite our criminal convictions, we deserve to be treated like human beings, and should not be subjected to criminal negligence and cruel and unusual punishment.

We know that many countries around the world, such as Iran, France, and the UK, have begun releasing prisoners en masse. Considering the outbreak of COVID-19 in several US federal prisons, with the infection and death rate climbing daily, the US needs to start doing something to address these heinous conditions, and start releasing us immediately!

7 Apr - From Solitary Confinement to Coronavirus Quarantine

Keith Lamar, aka Boman Shakur, has spent 27 years in solitary confinement. Here are some tips on making the best use of time alone.

MORE:

by Keith Lamar (*Abolition Media Worldwide*)

In solitary, I'm already quarantined somewhat. The only way we would get sick is if a CO [correctional officer] or somebody brings it in. It's probably inevitable because the guards, even if they don't have a temperature, can still be carrying the virus. And they are the ones who pass out mail, who give us food. I'm doing what I can in terms of washing my hands frequently, but there's only so much you can do. You just sitting here waiting to catch it.

I had a strict rule with my family that if anyone is sick please don't come visit, because once you get the flu [here] it's just torture. They don't give you any medications, beyond ibuprofen, so you pretty much have to suffer through. If you catch something as severe as coronavirus, I don't know how they intend to deal with that. Perhaps they would ship you out to another facility, a hospital. I'm definitely afraid.

They have suspended all visitations, so our families aren't able to come. Before, I was getting five to six visits a month: nieces and nephews, my uncles, aunts, friends. I realize there's a pandemic, so I'm all for suspending visits temporarily. My fear is that after this is said and done, they will use this as an excuse to extend the no-visit policy. I went 18 years without being able to hug my family. That's the only concern I have, besides getting sick.

People have been asking me questions ever since this "shelter in place," with people having to stay home. It's somewhat similar I suppose to being in solitary confinement, even though you might be with family and whatnot. Being in solitary confinement is really just being thrown upon yourself: You're running around, just like people do in your regular life, and now all of a sudden you're confronted with yourself, and find that in a lot of cases you haven't really put anything into yourself to occupy yourself. Everything is outward directed. That's what happened to me 27 years ago, and what happens to a lot of guys who are initially thrown into this situation—it's like being thrown into the ocean. You have to learn how to swim. You have to learn how to deal with yourself.

I've been lucky in a lot of ways. My cell has a bookshelf with three shelves, and there's a table to sit and write. I have a lot of music, books to read. Not to distract myself from myself, but to take me deeper into myself. I paint, I work out, I do yoga, I meditate.

I didn't know I could write. I dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. I was 23, 24 years old at the time I was thrown on death row, at a loss of what would become of me. My education, if you can call it that, has come from my own efforts. I just started reading Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, over and over. Paying attention to what he was doing and how. Before I knew what a semicolon was, I saw how he was using it. That's how I learned to write. And I became an author. I'm not the best writer. My book *Condemned* probably won't make the New York Times bestseller list. But that is my story, and I wrote it. And in that way I feel somewhat vindicated, that at least I tried to stand up and say something about my life.

I also like reading about the Holocaust. One of my favorite authors dealing with that genre is Primo Levi. Compared to my situation, his situation was much more extreme. You could die or be sent to the gas chamber on a whim. The arbitrariness of being thrown into those situations—I respond a whole lot to his experience. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, is also a big influence on my life. And Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. We’ve got three bookshelves, all three are filled with books. Being in solitary confinement, these books are my community. A lot of these guys, I’ve read their books over and over. So I’m intimately connected to these people. James Baldwin, I consider him like a family member.

I’ve watched quite a few people fall apart, lose their minds. But I went in another direction. So 27 years later I’m still sound in mind and body and spirit. I attribute that to just reading and cultivating myself. That’s the thing, when you’re thrown upon yourself, you realize you are more equipped than you realized. A lot of the system keeps us from realizing our own power. It’s a good opportunity for people to tap into that.

Being in solitary confinement, it’s a punishment. But people out in society, it’s an opportunity for your kids to get more in tune with themselves. Because when you’re in school, especially with the internet being what it is, everybody is generally being pulled away from themselves.

The root word of education is “to educe,” to bring forth that which is already there. Education isn’t really about what kind of career you’re gonna get or how you’re gonna make money. That’s not why we were born, to make money for somebody else. To get a big house. To have a nice car. You’re here to bring forth that which is already there. Hopefully young people being forced to stay home outside of the mainstream curriculum are able to get a glimpse of themselves and start pulling on that thread.

8 Apr - Ramsey Orta Update and Call For Support

The state is doing everything it can to kill Ramsey Orta.

MORE:

As Ramsey Orta, (who filmed the 2014, NYPD chokehold murder of Eric Garner) sits in solitary confinement in New York State prison, the virus is spreading rapidly across the prison systems. Time is running out.

My name is Jacob Crawford. I am the founder of WeCopwatch which is a national Copwatch group dedicated to educating the public about their rights when stopped by law enforcement and how to safely and effectively document the police when they stop members of our community.

Today I am speaking on behalf of one of our members, Ramsey Orta who is currently in Midstate Correctional Facility sitting in solitary confinement being deprived of his basic sanitation needs.

For those who don’t know, Ramsey filmed the 2014 NYPD choke death of Eric Garner. He was subsequently set up on a gun charge and a few months later indicted and various petty drug charges.

In 2016, Ramsey pled out to a non-violent felony D gun charge, and a simple drug charge and has since been incarcerated in New York State prison.

Ramsey has since been systematically abused and tortured by guards and has been moved to 10 different facilities, and placed in solitary confinement 7 times adding up to well over a year in isolation.

Since the corona virus outbreak, Ramsey has been denied basic necessities to keep himself clean and safe from the virus and we know this goes well beyond negligence. This pattern of targeted abuse is compounded with the very real fact that just a few years ago, there was an attempt to kill Ramsey and other inmates in Riker Island.

In 2014 while sitting in Rikers Island, Ramsey along with other inmates discovered rat poison in their food so we know that anything Ramsey is going through is not isolated, but rather systematic, and very intentional.

I personally believe that they are trying to kill Ramsey Orta before his July release date. We have called for call floods to Governor Cuomo and other various elements within the New York State Prison system demanding that Ramsey and other non-violent offenders are freed, but this has fallen on deaf ears.

Still, we cannot stop trying to get this predatory system to self-correct.

We want to thank all of you who have supported Ramsey throughout his incarceration. Ramsey would have never made it this far without your support. But today we are calling on the few of you that are actually in the position to help.

We need a high-powered lawyer to help us get Ramsey home now. He is eligible for early release. He pled out to non-violent offenses. The conditions in Midstate are horrendous, and the abuse Ramsey has been enduring is ongoing, and commands that he is freed now so he can return home to be with his fiancé.

If you have political power, influence, or you have access to the type of lawyer that can assist us with an early release, we need you contact us now.

At this point we don't need suggestions or ideas, we need an actual Lawyer willing to help make Ramsey's release happen now.

If you are that person, or can connect that person to us, please do. We are running out of options. You can hit the Facebook.com/SupportRamseyOrta page or email officialramseyorta [at] gmail.com.

To the rest of you struggling and losing loved ones out there, this call out doesn't apply to you. We're with you 100 percent. When the dust settles we are going to come together and hold these people accountable for letting this happen.

April 9th - Emergency! Ramsey Orta is in Danger! Here are our Demands!

This is our list of demands to Free Ramsey Orta:

1. Ramsey pled out to non-violent charges in 2016:

We demand that Ramsey is released because he is not a threat to society!

2. Ramsey is scheduled to be released in July of 2020:

We demand that Ramsey is released now because July is right upon us, but under the circumstances, is years away!

3. Ramsey is currently in danger of being exposed to COVID-19:

We demand that Ramsey be released because his prison sentence is not a death sentence!

4. Ramsey has been systematically abused throughout his incarceration.

We demand that Ramsey is released because the abuse he is experiencing grows by the day!

If you agree with our demands above, we ask that you copy and paste them and contact the various emails and numbers below. We also ask that you demand that all inmates immediately receive showers, soap, adequate food, and that ALL prisoners with similar conditions and experiences are released.

When you mention Ramey Orta in your emails and calls to prison entities, be sure to include his prison ID number, 16-A-4200

Governor Andrew Cuomo

Email: governor.ny.gov/content/governor-contact-form/Phone: 518.474.8390

Anthony J. Annucci: Acting Commissioner for New York State Prisons

Email: Commissioner@doccs.ny.gov/Phone: 518.457.8134

Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner - Daniel F. Martuscello, III

Email: Daniel.Martuscello@doccs.ny.gov/Phone: 518.457.8126

If you agree with our demands, share them everywhere! Share on your social media! Contact and email other entities, groups, and people you believe need to hear this!

April 10th - Update on Ramsey Orta

We made call, and you answered! Midstate has heard our immediate demands and has given Ramsey what he needs to be safe.

We are asking people to halt on call floods to Midstate and Office of Special Investigations regarding Ramsey and conditions for the moment while the prison honors these agreements and works to create a safer environment for inmates.

We are now transitioning back to our work to get Ramsey and others home and safe with their loved ones.

We created a set of demands to Free Ramsey Orta as he is eligible for release. In the demands are some suggestions on how to help support this effort. We thank you all for taking the time to advocate for Ramsey. Let's now work on the notion of Freedom.

April 15th - Ramsey Orta's life is being threatened by Corrections Officers at Midstate Correctional Facility!

As COVID-19 has struck Midstate Correctional Facility, Corrections Officers (COs) are taunting and threatening Ramsey that they will expose him with the virus.

We are requesting that you contact these Prison related entities below and let them know abuse against Ramsey Orta and other inmates will not be tolerated!

Be sure to email as well so there is a digital record!

Office of Special Investigations (OSI) – DOCCS

OSIComplaint@doccs.ny.gov; Phone: 844.674.4697

Anthony J. Annucci: Acting Commissioner for New York State Prisons

Email: Commissioner@doccs.ny.gov; Phone: 518.457.8134

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1. Demand that Ramsey Orta and countless other eligible inmates be released.
2. Demand that Ramsey and other inmates are provided showers, soap, and other sanitation now!

Also let them know that:

C.O. Mayo is asking Ramsey why is he not scared of him. He can make it hard for Ramsey to make it home!

C.O. Crego is saying he has the virus and that he wants and hopes to give it to Ramsey.

C.O. Bork is saying Ramsey will be lucky to make it home alive.

Let these authorities know that people are aware of these threats and there will be accountability for everyone involved should Ramsey be exposed.

April 19th - Ramsey Orta Has Fallen Sick After Officers Threaten To Give Him COVID-19

What happens next?

As you know, we have been raising the alarms on the escalated abuse Ramsey Orta has been facing throughout his incarceration in the New York State Prison System.

10 different facilities, 7 times in the hole, and over a year in solitary confinement shows that these have not been isolated incidents but rather a systematic pattern that transcends a particular facility or group of correctional officers.

While we have come to expect, anticipate, and prepare for this type of coordinated abuse, the recent incidents have accelerated and intensified with each passing day.

Two weeks ago I (Jacob Crawford of WeCopwatch) stated that I believed officers at Midstate Correctional Facility were trying to kill Ramsey Orta before his release date in July. With the deprivation of adequate food, soap, showers, transitioning to actual death threats, Midstate is making a very compelling case that my assumptions were true.

Ramsey fell ill a few days ago and he was transferred to the infirmary.

We do not know whether he is sick, if correctional officers have made good on their threats to give him COVID-19, or if they are messing with his food. All we know is that he had a really high temperature, and that he was transferred to medical.

Since the first report of a prison employee having COVID-19 at Midstate, there have been three more cases reported. We know at this point that there are many more. We are distraught and we don't know what to do.

As we wait for any information about or from Ramsey, we have to prepare for two different scenarios and neither are good.

1. One scenario is that guards did give Ramsey the virus and we need to try to get him evacuated and into a medical facility that is not in a prison where guards have been threatening his life. If this is the case, we are working against a clock, and time is running out.

2. Another scenario is that Ramey is simply sick, in solitary confinement, where the abuse by guards will continue to intensify to the point where Ramsey does get the virus, or is set up by guards which will hinder his chances of being released in July.

Either way, things are bad and as abolitionists, WeCopwatch has always taken the stance that this system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. Destroy people.

While we believe that people must be accountable for their actions when they hurt people, we do not believe the police, or the prison industrial complex holds any legitimacy in that process. We believe that we need to create institutions of justice that actually involve victims, and not descendants of slave patrols and strike breakers.

In that spirit that are 50,000 plus people awaiting death sentences because they are sitting in prison cells, run but dirty cops who have shown how good they are are contracting and spreading COVID-19.

Deja and I do not have faith in Midstate, NYSDOCC, or the Governor to do what is right. That is not their job. But we do have faith in all of you. Your love and concern not only for Ramsey, but for the world you wish to live in is what gives up hope.

We need to fight for a new day, because tomorrow is not promised. Whether it's providing mutual aid for unsheltered people, or standing up to a violent cop trying to create a new victim. We need to look beyond ourselves, beyond our immediate communities, and begin to live the world we can only imagine.

We will update you as soon as possible on how Ramsey is, what we need to do next, but we wanted to take a moment to let you know we really appreciate all of you so, so much.

We know these times are really difficult for us all, and it means the world that you heeded the call in our time of need. We'll be in touch.

9 Apr - June 11th is making a mixtape!

Hey all, if you were at the last ABC Conference a few years ago, you might remember the mixtape we made for that: a compilation of our prisoners' favorite songs and a "liner notes" zine where people talk about their choices.

MORE:

This year June 11th is doing something similar, but more expansive. And this time it will be public. We're always to find new ways to help people feel connected and to help us highlight, at least once a year, the long-term prisoners. We hope this project will allow us to get to know these prisoners better and keep a little bit of them with us throughout the year.

June 11th is making a mixtape!

SIDE A will be a collection of the favorite songs of some long-term anarchist prisoners (and a small letter about what it means to them). We've got most of the US prisoners covered, but we could use to help getting in touch with international prisoners or their supporters. Please be in touch if you have any leads.

SIDE B we're asking former prisoners to choose something for this compilation, along with a note about their selection.

BONUS SIDE C, if we can get it, will be original songs written for June 11th & for our prisoners.

We hope to have a limited number of physical copies available, as well as a Spotify playlist where applicable, as well as other internet playlists and downloads. The mixtape will be accompanied by a zine of the letters and notes from all the contributors. Hopefully we'll raise some money, but will definitely make it available to everyone.

Let us know if you're interested & pass this along to anyone else who might want to contribute.

10 Apr - Sentencing Dates Set for Kings Bay Plowshares 7

After a six-month wait, Judge Lisa Godbey Wood has set two dates at the end of May for sentencing the Kings Bay Plowshares 7.

MORE:

On May 28th, Carmen Trotta of the NYC–St. Joseph House Catholic Worker, Mark Colville of the New Haven, Amistad Catholic Worker, and Clare Grady of the Ithaca Catholic Worker will be sentenced in the Southern District Federal Court of Brunswick, Georgia.

On May 29th, Fr. Steve Kelly, S.J. held for the last 2 years in GA county jails (and who would welcome notes from us on US Post Office postcards); Martha Hennessy of the NYC Mary House Catholic Worker, a granddaughter of Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement; Elizabeth (Liz) McAlister of Baltimore's Jonah House and the widow of Phil Berrigan, and Patrick O'Neill of the Garner, N.C. Catholic Worker; will also be sentenced by the same court.

We will inform you of how sentencing may take place in the time of COVID-19 as we hear further details from the court. The arrival of the virus has brought delays to the whole process. These dates are all we know at this time. There is a possibility that they may be sentenced by video conferencing with the judge, but as of today, we don't know. Supporters may not be allowed in the courtroom.

There are a number of petitions circulating calling for the release of vulnerable prisoners in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic causing widespread death in all prisons and jails. Here's one you might support. Faithful America Petition, or join the RAPP Campaign, Release Aging Persons in Prison.

On March 23, the Tribune & Georgian announced the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Camden County. That same day, the U.S. Navy announced that it had awarded a contract for up to \$592.3 million to prepare the Kings Bay Naval Base for the new generation of Trident nuclear submarines. The plan to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal is projected to cost as much as \$2 trillion. Meanwhile, we are failing to keep people healthy and safe during the COVID-19 crisis. Clearly, our priorities have to change.

This April 4th was the second anniversary of the KBP7 action at the largest US nuclear submarine base in the world which houses has one-quarter of the US deployed nuclear weapons. They chose to act on April 4th to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination to lift up his message to end the evil of the triplets, racism, poverty, and militarism, underlining that the triplets must always be eradicated together.

We recommend that you watch the specially prepared video from supporters: youtu.be/h_UaiP0p71I

11 Apr - Virus-wracked federal prisons again expand release criteria

New policy allows home confinement for inmates who've yet to serve half their sentence.

MORE:

by Josh Gerstein (*Politico*)

The federal prison system has quietly broadened the ranks of inmates eligible to be transferred into home confinement as officials seek to limit the continuing spread of the novel coronavirus behind bars.

The latest move by the Bureau of Prisons allows inmates who have yet to complete half of their sentences to be considered for the early release program.

The shift was disclosed Friday in response to a lawsuit filed on behalf of inmates at an Oakdale, La., prison complex that has seen the deadliest outbreak of COVID-19 among federal facilities.

“Acting upon additional guidance from BOP Regional Office Staff, on the afternoon of April 9th, the reviewing staff have also expanded the criteria, removing the eighth factor, consideration of whether inmates in low or minimum facilities have served 50% of their sentence,” prison official Juan Segovia wrote in a court filing.

Segovia said the change resulted in officials reviewing 90 more prisoners for possible transfer home, of whom 15 were found “potentially eligible” and prepared for a 14-day prerelease quarantine.

Some inmates continue to be disqualified because they were convicted of violent offenses or child pornography-related crimes or because computerized “risk assessment” tools did not rate them among the least likely to reoffend, the prison official said. However, Segovia suggested those criteria could be relaxed further in the coming days.

“Staff continue to receive guidance on this matter and the number of inmates being given priority consideration is expanding daily,” he wrote. “Once we complete the [current] review ... I have been informed that the institution may consider expanding the criteria for review.”

Six inmates have died so far at the Oakdale prison complex, with 40 prisoners and 17 staff confirmed infected with the virus, according to official statistics released Friday. Nationwide, nine federal prisoners have died, 318 inmates and 163 staff have been confirmed as infected with the virus. Testing of prisoners has been limited, so the true infection rate is thought to be higher.

On March 26, citing the growing threat from the coronavirus, Attorney General William Barr ordered a stepped-up effort to move prisoners to home confinement.

Last Friday, he moved to prioritize releases from prisons suffering serious outbreaks, including those in Oakdale as well as others in Elkton, Ohio, and Danbury, Conn. He also used power granted him in the recent stimulus bill to consider a broader swath of inmates for home confinement, and he relaxed his initial insistence that inmates being sent home first spend at least 14 days quarantined behind bars.

However, *POLITICO* reported Friday that the fast-moving policy changes have caused confusion at some prisons, with significant numbers of inmates being sent to prerelease quarantine, then told they were ineligible.

Segovia's seven-page court declaration appeared to support these anecdotes. He said that on Monday, national BOP officials identified 4,013 inmates who were considered a "priority" for release based on the criteria being used at the time. However, of the 58 on the list at Oakdale, only six were deemed "potentially eligible" thus far. He said history of violence or sex offenses were responsible for most of the disqualifications.

A Bureau of Prisons spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment Saturday on the recent policy changes, including who decided to waive the earlier requirement a prisoner must have served at least half of their sentence.

Expanding that home confinement eligibility could aid many white-collar convicts given the nature of their crimes, but prison officials still appear to be prioritizing those at facilities suffering serious outbreaks of the virus as well as prisoners who are at particular risk due to health conditions or age.

Announcing the new criteria could also complicate the work of federal prosecutors inundated with motions requesting resentencing of defendants to home confinement because of the dangers posed by the virus.

"Reducing the sentence of the defendant to less than half of what he was sentenced to serve, particularly given where he is housed and the speculative basis of his motion, is unwarranted," New York-based prosecutors wrote Friday as they resisted such a bid by a prisoner serving at a Pennsylvania federal prison that has yet to see a confirmed case of the virus.

The prison system does not consider transfers to home confinement to be "releases." Such convicts are normally put on GPS monitoring, but Barr has waived that requirement for now because of the volume of transfers and the logistical difficulties related to the pandemic.

14 Apr - "Encouraging Others to Riot" by poem... the haps at FCI Englewood

While the BOP is upgrading their website and pretending they have some sort of plan to keep folks alive during this pandemic. FCI Englewood is again up to no good.

MORE:

We can assume in a retaliatory (previously predicted) move inspired by either a) the court filings regarding the ongoing and constant abuse the BOP is continuing to serve Eric via FCI Englewood or b) the article that was published that exposes some pretty gross fash BOP/Guard Eric has been given two separate severe disciplinary infractions.

BOP Disciplinary Program Statement is available here if folks want to follow along:
bop.gov/policy/progstat/5270_009.pdf

All disciplinary write-ups are categorized by severity level. 300's being least severe and 100's being the most severe. Different level offenses bring on different disciplinary procedures. But the common theme in all of them is the only defense you are allowed (no lawyers) is one of *them* they pick to defend you... against them. 300's don't even involve hearings and 200-100 series shots can come with additional federal criminal charges.

Eric was given two shots one of the greatest severity offense (100 series) and highest level of offense (200 series)

The shot 100 series shot Eric received on 3/31 was for
1. Encouraging others to riot and

2. Use of the mail to further criminal activity (greatest severity)

The story goes the CTU or counter terrorism unit of the BOP contacted FCI Englewood when a NYC ABC newsletter that is sent into prisons which re-published a poem that Eric wrote. That The BOP is considering a direct threat to the warden.

100 series shots, or GREATEST level severity shots carry some pretty hefty sanctions.

When speaking with his staff representative Eric was told that the only way to even SEE this “evidence” against him is to file a freedom of information request since it is classified. They recommend he just plea to the disciplinary charge.

Already disciplinary hearings are a joke and now he is not allowed to even review the evidence against him. Despite the fact this could impact his legal case he is not permitted his own defense or even to MEET with his lawyer at this time. This shot as well as the other can carry the shadow of a potential charge whenever it strikes their fancy. The Federal Colorado prosecutors waited until a year after his first incident to bring up charges.

Eric’s second shot came on 4/3 when he was showering and a guard led a sex offender into and through the showers. The guard alleges that Eric shook a shampoo bottle at them and a drop of water got into his eye.

Eric is now being charged internally again for assault of an officer.

It really is unnecessary to unpack this with some deep explanation for what is going on here. Its pretty blatant. Eric was clear Englewood was going to find a way to prevent their family from visiting.... that happened. The BOP is responding as the BOP does when they are exposed (it’s especially hefty when the exposure comes both in court and in the media). And it will likely follow Eric for the rest of his sentence. No, there will be no justice in these hearings as there has not been justice for anyone who has sat in those hearings before Eric. There is no justice for the now 13 dead federal prisoners because of BOP failures why would we find it in **their** disciplinary system.

Prose and musings are threats worthy of years of restricted contact with families. Business as usual at FCI Englewood on this Tuesday afternoon.

Eric can still use letters and books. His capacity to respond is severely limited because he isn’t allowed to hold onto his letters but he is making an effort and appreciates the support.

15 Apr - As Virus Spreads in Federal Prisons, People Inside Describe Chaos, While Families Are Left in the Dark

Unsurprisingly, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is horribly failing at keeping prisoners safe from the coronavirus.

MORE:

by Liliana Segura (*The Intercept*)

Richard Carrillo walked out of the Federal Correctional Institution at Otisville feeling nervous. It was March 24 and he was getting ready to board a shuttle bus in Middletown, New York, to make the 70-mile trip to Port Authority in Manhattan — the first leg of a long journey home. "I didn't think it was safe at all, to be honest with you," he said. Carrillo had been following the news. He knew that New York City had

become the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. "I mean, I'm just getting out of BOP and you're gonna send me to Manhattan to wait at the bus terminal for one, two, three, five hours?"

Carrillo's travel had been arranged months earlier, before the coronavirus gripped the country. But by March 18, the day the U.S. Bureau of Prisons confirmed its first two cases, FCI Otisville had suspended visitation and gone into "modified lockdown," reducing access to recreation and dining to one housing unit at a time. The attempts at social distancing were futile. In the medium-security facility where Carrillo was housed, men were double-bunked, with more than 100 people per unit. Just days before his release, he said, men in his unit were subjected to random breathalyzer tests that required blowing into a small funnel attached to a portable machine. "There's no way you're going to tell me right now that germs or particles aren't gonna blow up in your face," he said.

Carrillo was arrested on federal weapons charges in 2013. Based on his previous convictions, he was sentenced to 8 1/2 years under the Armed Career Criminal Act but won early release after a portion of the law was declared unconstitutional. Back home in Moorhead, Minnesota, he found a job, a house, and gained partial custody of his daughter. He also got involved in his community; in 2019, he helped organize the first Juneteenth celebration in Moorhead, appearing on the local news. But later that summer, Carrillo violated the conditions of his probation by drinking with some guys who also had felonies on their records. After 20 successful months on the outside, he was sent back to prison.

With tests for COVID-19 scarce on the outside, there was little reason for Carrillo to expect to be tested before his release from Otisville. Staff just took his temperature and sent him on his way. At the Port Authority bus terminal, "the whole six-foot distancing was pretty much thrown out the window," he said. People were coming and going, some approached asking for change. After more than four hours at the station, he boarded a Greyhound bus for a two-day trip with stops in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. "We were not distanced on that bus at all. At all."

Carrillo's destination was a halfway house in Fargo, North Dakota, just over the river from Moorhead. On his way, he called the facility, which is run by a nonprofit called Centre Inc., and warned a program manager that he had just been in New York City. When he finally arrived late at night on March 26, he again had his temperature taken and was told he would be quarantined. Instead, he was placed in a room with a man who had just come from a different federal prison — and "I was able to mingle and mix with every other person in the building, including staff."

Even more disturbing to Carrillo, he was told to start looking for work, which meant going out for job interviews. He had little choice but to comply, since it is a condition of his release. On March 31, the same day the BOP announced a 14-day quarantine across its prisons, Carrillo went to an interview at a pawn shop downtown. Later, he called his mother, who was stunned. "She said, 'I don't think they're supposed to be doing that.'" Carrillo said he was briefly isolated after he raised concerns. But it was too little too late. If he was infected in New York, "you just exposed the whole city and this whole halfway house," Carrillo said.

In an email, BOP spokesperson Sue Allison said that medical screening and quarantine are now requirements for people transferring to the community, but she did not specifically address halfway houses. She did not respond to questions about the BOP conducting breathalyzer tests.

Centre Inc. Executive Director Josh Helmer said the halfway house was following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. New arrivals are "placed in a sleeping room designated for quarantine in accordance with CDC recommendations, and monitored by on duty staff," he wrote, adding that "residents are quarantined individually, as long as sufficient rooms exist. If necessary, residents who are quarantined

because of travel who pass the screening could be quarantined with a roommate." As for job interviews, "residents can be approved to participate in an interview telephonically and/or in person with appropriate precautions in place," he said. But Carrillo, who had another interview at a grocery store on Monday, said the halfway house has not provided masks for such outings.

Today, Carrillo says the rules do seem to have grown slightly stricter since his arrival. He is not showing symptoms of COVID-19. But he and his family have other reasons to worry. His younger brother Shawn is incarcerated at a different federal facility, FCI Atlanta. To date, 16 people at the prison have tested positive for COVID-19, including three staffers. In an email to Carrillo last month, his brother wrote that things were getting bad. They were barely getting enough food or toilet paper and had no access to the commissary in order to buy soap. "He goes, 'If you don't hear from me in the next few days, know I love you, know that I care about you, and God bless you. I'll talk to you as soon as I can.'"

An Uphill Battle

As the coronavirus outbreak has spread inside the nation's prisons and jails, people inside and outside BOP facilities describe a system mired in chaos. Families are scared and mostly in the dark. "They're unbelievably stressed out," said Kevin Ring, president of FAMM, a criminal justice reform advocacy group. "And they have terrible, terrible stories of what's happening."

The anguish and anxiety are not entirely new. Although the threat posed by COVID-19 is certainly unprecedented, it's also a magnified version of a struggle that is all too common. It is often impossible under ordinary circumstances to get timely or reliable information about loved ones on the inside. Advocating for improved conditions or medical care has always been an uphill battle, let alone for early or compassionate release.

As the crisis has escalated, the BOP has rolled out a series of "action plans" aimed at combating the virus's spread. Visits have been eliminated and transfers have largely been halted. But many of the precautions have come too late, if they have been implemented at all. On the section of the BOP's website tracking COVID-19 cases, the numbers are rising every day. At Otisville, 13 cases have been confirmed since Carrillo was released, including five employees. As of April 14, the BOP had confirmed 694 total cases — 446 incarcerated people and 248 staffers. Fourteen incarcerated people have died of COVID-19 to date, according to the bureau.

Five of the fatalities have been at FCI Elkton in Ohio, where two new deaths were reported within 24 hours this week. The Ohio Justice and Policy Center and the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio have filed a lawsuit on behalf of men incarcerated at Elkton, who described cramped, unhygienic conditions. One man said medical personnel were "taking temperatures using the same thermometer for multiple people and only wiping it off with a sanitary napkin." The petition seeks the immediate release of individuals vulnerable to the virus, along with those who are close to their release dates.

The lawsuit comes on the heels of a disturbing video recorded on a contraband cellphone and posted on Facebook, which showed a man at Elkton wearing a mask and saying that they were being left to die. Vice News later identified the man; prison officials said he was negative for COVID-19 and denied most of his claims.

On April 6, the day that the Vice story broke, Brenda Cooper's husband called her from the prison. He asked her if she'd seen the video, then waited while she looked it up. "To me, it's just terrifying," she said.

"I don't want to lose my husband."

Cooper, who is going by a pseudonym to protect her husband's identity, lives in Manchester, Kentucky, where she works at a manufacturing plant. In the years since her husband went to prison, she has only been able to make the trip to see him once a year. The prison in Lisbon, Ohio, is hundreds of miles away. Between a hotel, gas, and meals, "I don't have the money to go up there all the time," she said. "I make \$9.50 an hour."

"This is a sickness that they need to take serious. And they're not."

The situation feels all the more senseless given some of the alternatives closer to home. The plant where she works sits in the shadow of FCI Manchester, a medium-security BOP prison. If her husband were there instead of in Ohio, she could make the drive in 15 minutes. "It's just really hard the way that they place everybody," she said. "It's like they try to hurt the family as much as they can."

When Congress signed the First Step Act in 2018, one of its bright spots was supposed to be a provision that would allow people in federal custody to be moved closer to home. But thus far, the law has not lived up to its promise. The transfers rely on the discretion of the BOP, which makes housing decisions based on numerous factors, from the programming available at a given institution to the need to keep co-defendants separate. Ring, who was instrumental in ensuring the passage of that provision, is disappointed with how it has played out. "I think the exception is still swallowing the rule," he said.

For Cooper, it would not have made a difference anyway. The provision applied only to people incarcerated more than 500 driving miles from home. Her husband is some 430 miles away.

Cooper makes no excuses for her husband's past. "He was on drugs and he was wild. He put me through hell the last two years he was home." But he's different now, with a good behavioral record, she said. She wishes that the BOP could release more people. "Let them wear an ankle bracelet, you know, home confinement. They're just so crowded together, there's no way that [the virus] is not gonna sweep through there. ... I stay a nervous wreck about him anyway," she said. "But to me, this is a sickness that they need to take serious. And they're not."

Halfway Home

While Carrillo was on his way to the halfway house in Fargo on March 26, U.S. Attorney General William Barr issued a memo directing the BOP to transfer certain "eligible inmates" from prisons to home confinement. "Many inmates will be safer in BOP facilities where the population is controlled and there is ready access to doctors and medical care," he maintained. But for others, including older people susceptible to the virus, home confinement would be "more effective."

That same day, FAMM sent a letter to the Department of Justice. The \$2 trillion coronavirus stimulus bill passed in late March allows the BOP to extend the amount of time a person in custody can be placed in home confinement, Ring wrote. Ordinarily, it cannot exceed six months or 10 percent of a person's sentence, but the CARES Act allows for the relaxation of this rule. Ring urged the BOP to "quickly transfer prisoners who are at high risk for complications from COVID-19 to home confinement."

The following week, Barr issued a second memo authorizing the expansion of home confinement under the CARES Act. The BOP now says it has released more than 1,000 people to home confinement since March 26, but the figure is misleading at best. For one, transfers are only conducted after a 14-day quarantine at a given BOP facility — and being approved does not mean being immediately quarantined. An untold number are still waiting. What's more, families have described a chaotic process across the country, with

loved ones approved for home confinement placed in the same special housing unit as people isolated due to symptoms. In a text message this week, Cooper also echoed what others with loved ones at Elkton have described: that the majority of men told to quarantine at the prison in preparation for home confinement have actually been returned to their cells.

"I don't know why they have not cleaned out the halfway houses. ... These are the people who are closest to the door."

Although it is hard to know precisely how many people have actually gotten home, Ring says it is almost certainly a fraction of the total figure cited by the BOP. And despite Barr's suggestion that those who are older and most vulnerable would be prioritized for home confinement, instead it has been mostly those serving time for low-level offenses who are close to their release dates. When it comes to halfway houses, "I don't think I know what the policy is even if there is one," Ring said. At the moment, each facility seems to be making its own rules, with many residents describing crowded conditions. "I don't know why they have not cleaned out the halfway houses," Ring added. "To me the halfway houses are worse for social distancing in most cases than the prisons are. And these are the people who are closest to the door."

Helmer, the Centre Inc. director, said "we have substantially increased our use of home confinement to help mitigate any possible spread of the virus, including those who are most vulnerable." But Carrillo has been told that home confinement is not an option, even though he is already on an ankle monitor — and even though he has a house minutes away where he could easily self-quarantine. At 42, he is not within the age group at greatest risk, but he does have a history of seizures that could compromise his health. Although Helmer said that no one has tested positive at any of the Centre Inc. facilities, the arbitrary rules and lack of precautions Carrillo describes create a risky environment. After a scare about a possible exposure at the halfway house on Friday night, a neighbor brought him Easter dinner over the weekend, Carrillo said, which he was able to receive in the parking lot. A supply of hand sanitizer dropped off for him was confiscated for containing alcohol.

Carrillo's mother, Denise Johnson, lives in Moorhead. She had hoped to put together a small welcome home dinner for Carrillo over Easter weekend, but that plan is on hold indefinitely. She's having a hard time explaining the situation to Carrillo's 8-year-old daughter, who lives with her. And she's having problems with her own health. Johnson has hemochromatosis, a hereditary blood disorder. "It's actually killing me slowly," she said. Every few weeks, she has to go to a clinic for treatment that leaves her exhausted. Usually she brings her granddaughter, but under the new COVID-19 protocols, this is prohibited. "I was counting on Richard to watch his daughter, but now he can't even get out of the halfway house to do it."

Johnson is especially worried about her youngest son, Shawn. Ironically, it was his good behavior that landed him in his current circumstance. He was in the process of being transferred to a low-security institution when he got stranded at FCI Atlanta. A family friend remembers getting a series of alarming emails last month. In one, Shawn wrote, "This illness will not kill me. I'm healthy plus the Lord has a plan for my life." But in a subsequent message, he asked for information on the virus, such as the symptoms and death and survival rates.

Carrillo partly blames himself for his brother's incarceration. "He looked up to me," he said. "And honestly, you know, my brother wouldn't be in the situation he's in if he didn't look up to me." Johnson said her son was "more of a follower than he was a leader." He was just 19 years old when he was arrested on drug conspiracy charges.

In an email Johnson received from Shawn on March 29, he said the virus had gotten inside the prison. "There is a really good chance for it to spread," he said. "I am trusting God to deliver me, but you never know." He made some requests in case he died. He wanted to be buried, not cremated. He also wanted to make sure his writing was preserved. It was stored in a clear green trapper keeper, he said. "Maybe you can make use of these things to help others, if the worst should happen to me." He told his mother he loved her — and "don't be out running around. Keep yourself safe and trust god."

16 Apr - Political Prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal Reports No COVID-19 Symptoms

Rumors have circulated online that internationally renowned political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, held at the SCI Mahanoy prison in Pennsylvania, was hospitalized with a headache and trouble breathing. But supporters with the Campaign to Bring Mumia Home reached him Wednesday, and he said the rumors are not true.

MORE:

Mumia Abu-Jamal: "You heard that I was hospitalized. It is not true. In fact, I haven't been up medical for about a month. I usually go up three times a week. As I said in a recent commentary, everybody's locked down. And you get 23 hours in the cell, and then, that last 24th hour, 45 minutes out of the cell. You can do — you can take a shower. You can get a bucket and swab your decks and mop your cell. Or you can call people on the phone, or you can plug up your tablet to the kiosk. But you're not leaving the block. And they only started yard about a week ago, and that's one 45-minute period every three days. So everybody in the state is locked down, just like everybody in the United States is locked down."

April 16th - Virtual Events for Mumia's 66th birthday

In celebration of Mumia's 66th birthday on April 24, please participate in these exciting virtual events from April 23-26. To sign up please use the links below:

To view the April 23 press conference register at eventbrite.com/e/at-66-mumia-fights-legal-political-urgent-covid-19-battle-tickets-102743526654

To register to view the teach-in eventbrite.com/e/teach-in-us-empire-v-political-prisoners-tickets-102522325034

Registration information for events on April 25 and 26 to follow.

19 Apr - Parole letters for Ferguson prisoner Josh Williams

Josh Williams, who's serving an eight-year sentence connected to his participation in the Ferguson uprising, is up for parole in June and there's a call for people to write support letters.

MORE:

The letters themselves should be addressed to the parole board but sent to Josh's prison address, and there's a sample letter people can see at freejoshwilliams.com/freejosh

If people would like to send a printed letter but don't currently have access to printing, you can contact the co-ordinator at freejoshwilliams@gmail.com and hopefully sort something out that way. Please feel free to pass this information on to your contacts and generally share in whatever way you see fit.