



POST OFFICE BOX 110034 BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11211

Updates for March 24th

9 Mar - Immigration activist sentenced to jail for protesting jail conditions

On March 9th, Sherrie Andre, an immigration activist, was convicted of trespassing and disturbing the peace and sentenced to 30 days in jail — the maximum possible sentence.

MORE:

by Stephanie Purifoy (*The Boston Globe*)

Andre was arrested after a peaceful protest in 2018 that was intended to raise awareness about conditions inside the Bristol County House of Correction, according to a statement from the FANG Collective, an environmental advocacy group.

Andre is a co-founder of the FANG Collective and took part in the protest to stand in solidarity with people detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and held in the corrections facility who were on a hunger strike, the statement said.

“We are surprised by the guilty verdict, and shocked and enraged that the Judge decided to impose the maximum sentence on Sherrie, despite dozens of letters of support summited on Sherrie’s behalf by community leaders,” the FANG Collective’s statement said. “This harsh sentence is reflective of the violence that the Bristol County Sheriff’s Department inflicts on people every single day.”

Bristol County has a contract with ICE that allows local law enforcement officers to act as immigration officials and detain people on immigration charges. According to the statement, the corrections facility, overseen by Sheriff Thomas Hodgson, has the highest rate of suicide of any prison in Massachusetts.

Hodgson’s office did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday night.

Bristol County accounted for about a quarter of all jail suicides in Massachusetts from 2006 to 2016, even though it holds 13 percent of the statewide jail population, according to an investigation by the New England Center for Investigative Reporting, published in the *Globe* in May 2017.

Andre will serve her 30-day jail term in Bristol County House of Correction. Two other activists arrested at the protest were sentenced to 10 days in jail, and another activist was ordered to pay a \$3,000 fine.

“We will continue to support Sherrie in the coming weeks as well as all those impacted by the Sheriff’s violent policies. We will keep fighting to support our community and hold the Bristol County Sheriff’s Department accountable for their violence.” the statement from the FANG Collective said.

11 Mar - Eric’s Declaration regarding abuse at FCI Englewood

On March 10th, Eric King filed a declaration detailing the abuse he has suffered at the hands of FCI Englewood. We are also including a new poem by Eric.

MORE:

The motion itself, the exhibits and the affidavit of his attorney are available to be read in the update section of his legal defense fundraiser: fundrazr.com/e1cKo1

March 13th - “What it Means to Me”

I first heard your voice when I was 15

Had no idea what it was to be free

Sheriffs kicking in doors, leaving furniture in the streets
Learning you could starve if you didn't have the means
All the saints taught me, listen to no worldly kings
Principal, coaches & priests, all the same things
When the police blinded me with war chemicals
laughter was my partner, I hadn't broken my rules
After god went away, Anarchy never faded
Politicians love to recruit but I can't be persuaded
My anarchy, grew with me, walmart & McDonalds Protests
Activism always went through stages
learn-act, learn more-act more, growth, always growth
Sometimes I was an anarcho-fascist, forcing my freedom
with fists and knives, words and hated
the first dominant behavior I had to destroy
Was my own loud-always-right voice
To me Anarchy meant facing up to my own
Patriarchy, xenophobia, racism, homophobia
All of my most productive battles weren't vs cops
But against hidden learned behaviors
Anarchy meant allowing growth, loving myself
to acknowledge being harmful
The revolution always begins between our 2 ears
& the more I open myself to experiences not my own
The better I become
For me anarchy is in the heart & in the streets
I meant friendship, not chances to be judge
I've failed in this aspect many times
Anarchy was a way to live free
A way to find what that means
then instill it in my everyday life
Anarchy means standing up when it counts
Being there when able
My anarchism couldn't have existed
In a vacuum removed from action
There was never a movement for me
nor was I a "lone wolf"
Sometimes comrades joined me
other times the goddess was my partner
There was no attendance, roll-call
Just a desire to make the world better
Anarchy to me meant love, it meant calm
it was living how you want the world to be
Some took it in lots of opposing directions
that was ok also
No one owns an idea
although some swear to have the receipt
My anarchism loved plants & nature
wasn't a big fan of consumerism
& hated genocidal meat "farms"
... My anarchism loved people who love people

Cops, military folks, government bureaucrats were not welcome
If your prerogative was to limit, take from or own/control people
we were enemies
Does anarchy still exist?
I pray so
I'm afraid of the internet swallowing it whole
& "clicktivism" overriding activism
Of sectarianism splintering any progress being made
Of Trump wearing everyone out
then some being convinced in electoral leadership
But only if Berndog wins
Prisons need to be burned, CEOs beheaded
communities need to grow & heal together
That's what Anarchism is to me
Action based healing and growing

March 14th - Word from Eric amid the COVID-19 outbreak

We have word from Eric. FCI Englewood has cancelled visits for 30 days. However, staff has yet to wear masks into the facility. With the BOP on a hiring freeze, it is going to get really interesting if prisoners start to get sick. The BOP has issued a statement saying that attorney visits are also suspended for 30 days. The BOP is so quick to cut outside visits because prisoners are such a vulnerable population, yet they will not spend the \$.50 per guard per day to prevent staff from infecting prisoners. Eric says that they took "the good soap" leaving them with this horrible grainy prison-brand soap. Prisoners are also being denied access to the law library at FCI Englewood.

The BOP has issued a statement saying that prisoners are now allowed to purchase 500 phone minutes in comparison to the previous 300 minutes before to help keep families in contact. However, the reality is many in the segregated housing units (SHU) across the BOP do not have access to the phones (and if they do, they get just one 15 minute call a month). They do not have access to email, letters are held and delayed by the prison and now they are not even permitted legal or regular visits (SHU visits are behind glass or video). FCI Englewood is choosing to uphold the illegal phone block they brought against Eric. Suddenly he finds himself being held pretty incommunicado again.

This is a reality Eric shares with so many across the nation. Forced to wait helpless while the prison fails to act to keep them safe. During this pandemic, prison staff who interact with prisoners should be wearing masks to help limit the transmission of the virus. During incubation people are contagious so at the very least, masks should be a requirement for ALL staff interacting with prisoners. Further, the BOP needs to give out soap and cleaning supplies and subsidize the cost of vitamins and medicine to treat illnesses. SHU prisoners who do not have access to email or phones need to be allowed access to email and phone at least once per day while visitation is suspended. The BOP needs to end ALL commissary restrictions for SHU prisoners. They need to also stop limiting the number of stamps SHU prisoners are allowed. Prisoners need to also be allowed unmonitored phone calls to their attorneys while they are being held incommunicado.

The BOP needs to put their plan in writing to keep the over 146,000 people in BOP custody (and the additional 28,000 in other facilities) safe (similar to what every other government agency is currently doing). Simply holding the entire prison population from their loved ones is not handling an outbreak.

Among that population, the BOP currently has 10,642 prisoners in segregation. This leaves 9,441 prisoners facing the same situation Eric is this morning: in the SHU of a regular BOP prison suddenly finding themselves in complete isolation without even legal visits. On top of that, they have no email access and

only one phone call a month if they are lucky. They are often restricted in what they can buy on commissary (including medicine, soap and food). Out of those 10,000 people, only 1,597 are in disciplinary segregation which means the rest of the population (9,441) is not even serving disciplinary sanctions.

From the BOP's indexed files there are currently two prisons with potentially exposed staff and they are not asking the EXPOSED guard's wife who also works at the prison to quarantine. The BOP is not even taking the simple precaution of wearing masks.

There is the possibility Eric can receive books right now again. We have not been able to confirm that it's not a fluke before opening up the Amazon wishlist. But if folks have books at their house they want to send Englewood's book policy is here at bop.gov/inmates/communications.jsp#mail

12 Mar - Bureau of Prisons and NYS DOCCS Suspend Visitation

The messaging is straight up state propaganda, but we are including the New York State Department of Corrections' and federal Bureau of Prisons' releases on suspending visits below.

MORE:

In December 2019, a new respiratory disease called Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was detected in China. COVID-19 is caused by a virus (SARS-CoV-2) that is part of a large family of viruses called coronaviruses. Recently, community-wide transmission of COVID-19 has occurred in the United States, including New York where the number of both persons under investigation and confirmed cases are rapidly increasing.

The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) is responsible for the safety, health, rehabilitation, and supervision of nearly 44,000 incarcerated individuals and over 35,000 individuals on community supervision through the tireless efforts of nearly 30,000 employees. The Department's greatest concern is the safety and well-being of our employees and individuals within our care, custody, and supervision, particularly during this developing public health emergency. To that end, the Department must swiftly impose restrictions and precautions to prevent additional spread of infectious viral transmission of COVID-19 in both correctional facilities and the community writ large.

As this public health emergency rapidly develops, the Department will closely monitor the situation and extend these restrictions as necessary.

Visitation Suspended at All Correctional Facilities. While this suspension of visitation will be temporary, the Department recognizes the immediate impact on incarcerated individuals throughout the correctional system. However, the current situation demands this significant action to safeguard the health and safety of all incarcerated individuals, employees, as well as their families and communities. While in-person visitation will be impossible to replace, the Department will provide the following benefits to encourage individuals to keep in contact with their family and friends during this temporary suspension:

- Five (5) free stamps per week for use in accordance with Directive #4422, "Inmate Correspondence Program";
- Two (2) free secure messages per week via electronic tablet; and
- One (1) free phone call per week in accordance with Directive #4423 "Inmate Telephone Calls".

This suspended visitation also applies to family reunion programs. However, legal visits will not be impacted by this visitation suspension. Legal visits will be conducted as non-contact (i.e. no physical contact allowed), as requests are submitted, and that option remains available within the facilities.

The Department takes seriously its duty to ensure the safety and well-being of those who work, visit and live in our correctional facilities, as well as those who supervise or are supervised in the greater community of New York. During this difficult time, the Department is appreciative of everyone's patience and understanding as we continue to face this virus together.

March 13th - BOP Statement

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) manages a nationwide correctional system involving 122 prisons located throughout the country, which are of various security levels and specialized missions. The BOP has been planning for coronavirus (COVID-19) since January 2020. Phase One activities included guidance from the Health Services Division regarding description of the disease, where the infection was occurring and best practices to mitigate transmission. An agency task force was working in conjunction with subject matter experts in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and reviewing guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO).

The BOP has been coordinating its COVID-19 efforts using subject-matter experts both internal and external to the agency including guidance and directives from the WHO, the CDC, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Office of the Vice President. BOP's planning is structured using the Incident Command System (ICS) framework.

As a result of these ongoing efforts, the BOP, after coordination with DOJ and the White House, is implementing Phase Two of our COVID-19 response. Effective immediately, the following national measures are being deployed by the BOP in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, acknowledging the United States will have more confirmed cases in the coming weeks and also noting that the population density of prisons creates a risk of infection and transmission for inmates and staff. These national measures are also being put in place to ensure the continued effective operations of the federal prison system and to ensure that staff remain healthy and available for duty.

SOCIAL VISITS: Social visits will be suspended for 30 days, at which time the suspension will be reevaluated. To ensure inmates maintain social ties, the BOP will allow for additional inmate telephone communications. Inmates will be allowed 500 (vs. 300) telephone minutes per month.

LEGAL VISITS: Access to legal counsel remains a paramount requirement in the BOP but like social visiting, the BOP is mitigating the risk of exposure created by external visitors. As such, while in general, legal visits will be suspended for 30 days, case-by-case accommodation will be accomplished at the local level and confidential legal calls will be allowed in order to ensure inmates maintain access to counsel. Attorneys seeking an in-person visit with their client or a confidential call should contact the institution Executive Assistant (see email address on the relevant facility bop.gov page) or contact the appropriate Consolidated Legal Center for the BOP institution (see page 54 of the Legal Resource Guide). If approved for an in-person visit, the attorney will need to undergo screening using the same procedures as staff.

INMATE MOVEMENT: All inmate facility transfers will be suspended for 30 days, at which time the suspension will be reevaluated. Exceptions are allowed for forensic studies, writs, Interstate Agreements on Detainers (IAD), medical or mental health treatment, and release to pre-release custody. Other case-by-case exceptions (e.g. for judicial proceedings) may be approved by BOP Regional Counsel. Admission of new inmates will continue.

OFFICIAL STAFF TRAVEL: Official staff travel (with the exception of relocation) will be suspended for 30 days, at which time the suspension will be reevaluated. Any exceptions may be approved by the Deputy Director of the BOP.

TRAINING: All staff training, with the exception of basic staff training for new employees at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and the local facility, is suspended for 30 days at which time the suspension will be reevaluated. Any exceptions must be approved by the Deputy Director of the BOP.

STAFF HIRING: Staff hiring initiatives will continue.

CONTRACTORS: Contractor access to BOP facilities will be restricted for 30 days to only those performing essential services (e.g. medical or mental health care, religious, etc.) or those who perform necessary maintenance on essential systems. Contractors who require access will be screened using the same procedures as staff prior to entry.

VOLUNTEERS: Volunteer visits will be suspended for 30 days, at which time the suspension will be reevaluated. Exceptions will be approved by the Deputy Director of the BOP. Alternate means of communication (e.g. telephone calls) will be available for inmates who request to speak privately with a religious advisor. Volunteers who are approved for access will be screened using the same procedures as staff prior to entry.

SCREENING OF STAFF: Enhanced health screening of staff will be implemented in areas with "sustained community transmission" and at medical referral centers. Sustained community transmission is determined by the CDC and will be indicated on the map on this resource page where state community transmission indicates "Yes." Such screening includes self-reporting and temperature checks for the next 30 days, at which time the process will be reevaluated.

SCREENING OF INMATES: The BOP manages an infectious disease management program as a matter of routine. To address the specific issues involving COVID-19, the BOP uses the following practices: All newly-arriving BOP inmates are being screened for COVID-19 exposure risk factors and symptoms. Asymptomatic inmates with exposure risk factors are quarantined. Symptomatic inmates with exposure risk factors are isolated and tested for COVID-19 per local health authority protocols.

TOURS: Tours will be suspended for 30 days, at which time the suspension will be reevaluated. Any exceptions will be approved by the Deputy Director of the BOP. If approved, participants will be screened using the same procedures as staff prior to entry.

MODIFIED OPERATIONS: For the next 30 days, the BOP will implement nationwide modified operations to maximize social distancing and limit group gatherings in our facilities. For example, depending on the facility's population and physical layout, the institution may implement staggered meal times, recreation, etc. These modifications will be reevaluated in 30 days.

The BOP is coordinating with the U.S. Marshals Service and Immigration and Customs Enforcement on these initiatives to ensure that those agencies can adjust for impact to their operations. BOP will also be sharing this guidance with its private prison contractors.

More information regarding COVID-19, and the BOP's response, can be found on the new resource page.

12 Mar - Judge Orders Chelsea Manning and Jeremy Hammond Released From Jail

Documents ordering the release of Chelsea Manning and former AntiSec hacker Jeremy Hammond were signed on March 12th by the U.S. District judge who detained them both in a Virginia jail last year for refusing to testify in the federal grand jury investigating WikiLeaks.

MORE:

by Dell Cameron (*Gizmodo*)

Judge Anthony Trenga ordered both grand-jury resisters released, saying their testimony is no longer being sought after by prosecutors. The business of the grand jury itself, with which both refused to cooperate, is “concluded,” he wrote.

Their defiance came at a high cost—both literally and figuratively.

While released from the jail that’s held him since October, Hammond will soon be en route back to a federal correctional facility to serve out the remainder of a 10-year sentence for his role in the 2012 hacking of Texas-based intelligence firm Stratfor.

Had Hammond not been called to testify, close supporters say, it is possible he would already be a free man. The 35-year-old Chicagoan anarchist—whose computer crimes were thoroughly documented and in some cases instigated by an FBI informant in late 2011—had put months of work into an intensive substance abuse program, which could have earned his release months ago. That opportunity was seemingly wrecked, however, the moment prosecutors yanked the high-profile inmate out of the medium-security prison in Kentucky where’d he been serving the last years of his sentence.

Despite having her freedom, the toll paid by Manning seems even more dire. The former Army intelligence analyst, who had previously served seven years of a 35-year sentence for leaking classified records about the American wars to WikiLeaks, was hospitalized on Wednesday after attempting to take her own life. She leaves the Alexandria jail with more than a quarter-million dollars in fines, a punishment for refusing to testify, a decision she said she had based on principle.

In a statement to *Gizmodo*, Manning’s legal team asked that reporters grant her privacy “while she gets on her feet.”

It remains unclear what new information Manning could have provided prosecutors about WikiLeaks or its founder, Julian Assange, who is currently battling extradition to the U.S. in London. The two allegedly spoke briefly in 2010 in online chats prior to the hand off of hundreds of thousands of secret diplomatic cables and battlefield reports that, while doing very little to endanger the nation’s security, deeply embarrassed the U.S. State Department. Those conversations were already fully disclosed in transcript form during Manning’s court martial in 2013 and her attorneys say there is nothing new to be disclosed.

Hammond had perhaps more to give. Though the FBI has copies of chat room logs in which Hammond claims to have spoken with Assange—copies of which *Gizmodo* has reviewed, despite them being sealed for years by a Manhattan judge—it seems unlikely the government knows the precise details of Hammond’s discussions with WikiLeaks. What is clear is that neither Assange, nor anyone else associated with WikiLeaks, had prior knowledge of the Stratfor hack, which included some five million company emails later published by the anti-secrecy group.

As *Gizmodo* first reported in 2018, Hammond and his cohorts acquired a search tool after the hack from a source whom they believed was Assange himself, which was meant to help them rifle through Stratfor’s stolen files.

Assange, currently confined in the U.K., faces a 17-count indictment in the U.S., including charges under the Espionage Act. A photo shared online last month appeared to show the divisive 48-year-old publisher being held in a glass box during a court room hearing.

If extradited and convicted in a U.S. court, Assange could face as many as 175 years behind bars, which some experts believe could raise “profound First Amendment issues.”

March 13th - Jeremy Hammond Released from Contempt for Resisting EDVA Grand Jury

The Jeremy Hammond Support Committee is pleased to announce that Jeremy has been released from his contempt for resisting a grand jury in the Eastern District of Virginia as of yesterday, 12 March 2020.

In a statement once again reaffirming his commitment to stay strong and silent against the grand jury, Jeremy said,

“Because I see the United States government as fundamentally illegitimate and unjust, I reject the notion that I have any sort of ‘obligation to testify’ before a grand jury. The additional jail time I have endured – and may continue to endure – as a penalty for refusing to testify will never cause me to betray the ideas which have given my life meaning and purpose.”

In his order releasing Jeremy from his contempt, Judge Anthony Trenga stated that “the business of Grand Jury 19-3 had concluded,” and “[upon] consideration of the Court’s March 12, 2020 Order discharging Grand Jury 19-3, the Court finds that Mr. Hammond’s appearance before the Grand Jury is no longer needed, in light of which his detention no longer serves any coercive purpose.” (Torrent and other formats available here.) Judge Trenga ordered Jeremy returned to the custody of the Bureau of Prisons, where he will now finish serving the remainder of his sentence.

While this will not mean total freedom for Jeremy, and it is bittersweet in that had Jeremy not been called in front of a grand jury the government knew he would not testify in front of he would have been released to a halfway house three months ago, it is a major step towards his freedom, and we are thrilled that this nightmare is over and Jeremy can once again focus on finishing his sentence and returning to his friends and family.

We know that many of you want to know when Jeremy will ultimately be freed and, sadly, we do not have an answer for you. When he was pulled from FCI Memphis, he was removed from the Residential Drug Treatment Program that, had he been allowed to complete, would have secured his release to a halfway house on 12 December 2019. By not allowing him to complete the program, the “good time” he would have been credited with for completing the program was taken away. It is yet another injustice of this grand jury – the government knew that Jeremy would never be willing to cooperate with the state. His incarceration has only deepened his commitment to his anarchist ideals and his belief in total prison abolition. Despite this, they brought him to Virginia anyway, incarcerating him there for three months past his projected release date and adding a minimum of eight additional months to his sentence. Once he returns to the Bureau of Prisons, they will recalculate his release date.

And, finally, we want to send our solidarity to Chelsea Manning, who was also released. Chelsea had been called in front of the same grand jury as Jeremy and also chose to resist. It came at great personal cost, and we applaud her bravery and steadfastness. Her courage is nothing short of amazing, and we send our love to her and her support team for the moral fortitude they have shown over and over again in the face of overwhelming odds. Unfortunately, upon her release, Judge Trenga declined to cancel the outrageous legal fines Chelsea has been saddled with for her refusal to testify. A fundraiser has been set up to help her pay these fines – please share and donate as much as you can.

We deeply thank everyone who has supported Jeremy over these trying months. The fight is not over. Jeremy needs our support now more than ever as he enters the last months of his sentence and begins preparations for his ultimate release. We will keep everyone apprised of when and where Jeremy is moved

to, and when his ultimate release date may be as more information becomes available. Again, thank you all for your solidarity.

13 March - Release People From Jail To Prevent A Coronavirus Catastrophe Behind Bars

COVID-19, the novel coronavirus spreading across the globe, exposes the dangers of the U.S.'s eroded and underfunded safety net.

MORE:

by Jose Saldana, Komrade Z*, and Nadja Guyot (*Shadowproof*)

Inadequate public health infrastructure and a lack of access to health care, paid sick leave, and basic material needs leave us woefully unprepared to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and care for people who get sick in our communities.

But the threat to people incarcerated in jails, prisons, and detention centers across the United States is even greater.

The coronavirus crisis compounds the health crisis that incarcerated people across the country face every day, some for years and decades. This is especially true for elderly incarcerated men and women, who face heightened risk of death and injury from the virus.

For example, over 675 elderly incarcerated people have died in New York State prisons alone since 2011. The vast majority are people of color and the average age at death is 58 years old. This is a human crisis hidden behind prison walls.

People who are hyper-policed and disproportionately incarcerated—Black and brown working-class people, people who use drugs, homeless people, trans and gender nonconforming people, people with disabilities, and people with mental illness—come from communities most impacted by chronic illness and lack of access to medical care prior to being incarcerated.

Health services in jails may be a person's first contact with medical personnel and where they first receive diagnoses. Once incarcerated, jails, prisons, and detention centers expose people to incarceration-specific health risks, exacerbating existing health conditions and provoking new ones.

While infectious diseases—from legionnaires disease to chickenpox, tuberculosis to scabies—circulate rapidly and regularly through correctional institutions, prisons are more concerned with maintaining order than ensuring health.

Prison staff minimize serious illness, deter incarcerated people from raising health concerns, neglect to take them to medical appointments, berate and punish them for being sick, and retaliate against them by withholding care. Health care co-pays make accessing healthcare nearly impossible, especially at the average wage for prison labor of 14 cents an hour.

In Florida, incarcerated people say when an infectious disease has been detected, physicians become agents of punishment, stripping incarcerated people of their clothes and belongings and quarantining them in crowded cells with other sick people.

Under non-pandemic conditions, incarceration makes already-sick people sicker and makes healthy people less healthy. Jails, prisons, and detention centers are notoriously deadly in their lack of medical care. Medical services are set up not to provide care but to guard against “costly” utilization and lawsuits.

Fundamentally, the physical facts of confinement—restricted movement, overcrowding, lack of access to sunlight and healthy food, and the severing of family and community ties—increase incarcerated people’s vulnerability to illness and reduce their capacity to fight infection.

COVID-19 and other recent crises bring these failures into dramatic and devastating relief. In 2019, for example, as Justice Department lawyers argued in front of the Supreme Court that access to soap wasn’t mandated by law, mumps rocketed through immigration detention centers across Texas. And incarcerated people are routinely left at the mercy of hurricanes and other dangerous weather conditions, even as they fill sandbags and fight fires to protect communities outside the prison walls.

So it should come as no surprise that jails and prisons across the country are woefully unprepared to protect incarcerated people from the unique threats posed by coronavirus.

There is currently no soap in the Metropolitan Detention Center, the federal jail in Sunset Park, Brooklyn that just last year was without heat, hot water, electricity, and medical care during the coldest days of winter. Hand sanitizer is contraband for incarcerated people in many jurisdictions (even as prison labor is being deployed to produce it) because it contains alcohol. In Florida, cleaning supplies like bleach are contraband and incarcerated people can be punished for possession.

Instead of prioritizing expanding access to coronavirus testing and comprehensive and humane medical care, jails, prisons, and detention centers are likely to rely on restricting family visits, putting potentially-infected people in “medical keeplock,” solitary confinement, and facility-wide lockdowns to ostensibly prevent the disease’s spread.

This is not healthcare, it is punishment, and it will increase incarcerated people’s vulnerability to illness, mental health distress, and suicide.

COVID-19’s impact on the elderly, who are already suffering from serious age-related chronic ailments, will be devastating. And people who are already housed separately (and inadequately) for serious health issues will be further marginalized, treated as second-class people in a third-class world, even as they will likely be the first to feel the effects of the coronavirus. P

rison clinics have demonstrated time and again that they will fail to provide adequate care to growing numbers of sick people as privatized health care services cut costs on regular medical needs.

Fortunately, the public health evidence is clear. If incarcerating people is bad for individual and community health and increases health disparities of race, class, ability, gender, and national origin, keeping people out of jail, prison, and immigration detention and releasing people who are currently confined is good for our health and safety.

In response to the threat to incarcerated people posed by coronavirus, local, state, and federal jurisdictions must use their powers, including pardon and clemency, to release people now, beginning with elderly, ill, immunocompromised, and pregnant people.

Jurisdictions also must seize this moment to reduce “jail churn”—the rate at which people cycle through local jails exacerbating the spread of illness—by reducing arrests, declining prosecution, decriminalizing conduct, eliminating pretrial detention, and releasing people to fight their cases from home. Providing life’s necessities instead of criminalizing survival strategies will help, too.

By pursuing a strategy of radical decarceration we can divest from the jails and prisons that are making our communities sick and sicker, and invest in community-based, humane, and dignified healthcare for all, in the face of COVID-19 and beyond.

—
Jose Saldana is the Director of Release Aging People in Prison Campaign.

**Komrade Z* is an incarcerated organizer, abolitionist, and freedom fighter writing under a pseudonym to avoid retaliation.

Nadja Guyot is a graduate student and organizer in NYC.

14 Mar - Incarcerated Elders are at Risk of Coronavirus: Take Action Today

As concerns rise about the spread of COVID-19 around the country, Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) continues to fight for the release of older people in prison, who are particularly vulnerable to the Coronavirus.

MORE:

When the virus enters the prison system, it will have a devastating impact on incarcerated elders. Governor Cuomo must take immediate action by granting emergency clemencies. We need to keep the pressure on Cuomo to release our elders and other vulnerable New Yorkers from state custody.

TAKE ACTION TODAY:

- Sign and share this Color of Change petition calling on the governor to #FreeOurElders
act.colorofchange.org/sign/ny_cuomo_coronavirus
- Tweet at Governor Cuomo.
Sample tweet:
"SIGN & SHARE: Petition calling on @NYGovCuomo to take action for justice involved New Yorkers in the wake of the Coronavirus. Our demands:
 1. Emergency clemencies
 2. End prison slave labor
 3. #NoRollbacks on bail & keep jail populations low
- Call Governor Cuomo: 518-474-8390
Phone Script:
Hi my name is [insert name here] and I'm calling on the governor to grant emergency clemencies to older New Yorkers in prison, who are particularly vulnerable to the Coronavirus. I ask that the governor please take action before it's too late.

Please stay tuned for further news of our upcoming efforts as some events will be held online.

17 Mar - Employee at Sing Sing prison tests positive for coronavirus, raising fear

An employee at the notorious Sing Sing state prison in Westchester County tested positive for the coronavirus, setting off fears the virus could spread through the prison system.

MORE:

by Joseph Spector (*USA Today*)

The state Department of Corrections confirmed Tuesday night that the worker tested positive, but that no inmates have tested positive for COVID-19.

Two individuals, both currently asymptomatic, were tested, and the results came back negative.

By Wednesday afternoon, the state confirmed that a civilian staff member at an Albany area prison also tested positive, as did an officer at Rikers Island in New York City.

New York City said it was banning in-person visitations at its prisons, of which Rikers is one.

"A uniformed member of our department has tested positive for COVID-19 and is now under the care of a medical professional," Peter Thorne, a spokesman for the city prison system, said.

"The officer is assigned to a post that does not routinely include contact with people in custody and will not return to work until medically cleared per DOHMH guidance."

The state prison system said it has followed state health protocols and is "doing the reverse trace to identify and notify any potential impacted individuals."

The maximum security prison along the Hudson River in Ossining, about 30 miles north of New York City, has about 1,700 prisoners.

The positive case, the first known in the state's prison system, drew concern from criminal justice advocacy groups.

Westchester had 380 positive cases of coronavirus on Tuesday, second most in the state to New York City. And overall New York now has the most cases in the nation.

"COVID-19 has officially entered the New York State prison system," the groups The Release Aging People in Prison Campaign, Parole Preparation Project, VOCAL-NY and Worth Rises said in a statement.

"That means thousands of incarcerated elder New Yorkers and other people in prison with vulnerable immune systems are at serious risk of contracting and dying from the virus."

The groups called on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to grant emergency clemencies to older adults, pregnant people and sick prisoners.

"This is no longer a hypothetical. It is time for the governor to take swift and thorough action now and grant life-saving clemencies," the groups said.

Cuomo has not indicated publicly any plans to issue clemencies for those at heightened risk for coronavirus in the state's 54 prisons.

17 Mar - Remembering a Panther - Mondo we Langa

The last time the author saw former Black Panther, incarcerated activist and poet, Wopashitwe Mondo Eyen we Langa, he asked a question they didn't fully understand.

MORE:

by Elena Carter

"Here's a riddle for you," he began, gap-toothed and grinning from his hospice bed. "If the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second and there are 5,180 feet in a mile and if the speed of sound is 1,100 feet per second, how long would it take you to see that you've heard something?"

It was the early afternoon of Super Bowl Sunday 2016, a few hours before Beyonce and her back-up dancers would take the field in Black Panther-inspired berets. I remember shrugging at Mondo's question,

bemused and a little frustrated. He'd posed the question to me before in postscript. "Wasn't that fun?" he wrote in tight, minuscule cursive at the end of the first letter he sent me, his reply to my letter of introduction. I wasn't the only one he'd put the question to. Mondo loved riddles and he recycled his repertoire shamelessly.

But what began as a nonsensical combination of stats morphed into a poignant and surprisingly simple sentiment, one that now seems impossible to have missed. How long would it take you to see that you've heard something? James Baldwin once wrote: "The poet or the revolutionary is there to articulate the necessity, but until the people themselves apprehend it, nothing can happen." During the short time I knew Mondo we talked a lot about art and responsibility. He wrote his first poem in high school, at a point in his life when he was becoming interested in social justice, but was still a few years away from becoming a Panther, from being radicalized.

I met Mondo during the final year and a half of his life, visiting him in the Nebraska State Penitentiary. At the time of his death on March 11th, 2016, just over four years ago today, he had served 45 years in prison. I wrote about his case while a graduate student at the University of Iowa. Formerly known as David Rice, Mondo changed his name in the early 80s, an attempt to reclaim his African identity.

In 1971, he and his co-defendant Edward Poindexter were sentenced to life in prison for the murder of an Omaha policeman. The officer, Larry Minard, died when a suitcase bomb exploded in a North Omaha home on August 17, 1970. Minard was responding to a phony report that a woman was being assaulted inside a vacant home. At the time, Ed and Mondo were leaders in the Omaha chapter of the Black Panther Party. The two were arrested after a 15-year-old former member implicated Ed and Mondo as the brains behind the bomb plot, though he initially confessed to planting the bomb and placing the phony 911 call alone.

Eight years after the trial, an FBI memo surfaced showing cooperation between police and FBI in suppressing the audio of the phony 911 call as evidence that might have demonstrated Mondo and Ed's innocence. Court documents also reveal that Omaha police had been monitoring Mondo and Ed for two years prior to the murder.

Though Amnesty International called for Mondo and Ed to have a new trial or be released, their case received little national attention. Omaha, too, has mostly forgotten them, forgotten that the Panther story extends beyond Oakland and Chicago. And yet the issue that prompted the formation of the Omaha Chapter of the Black Panther Party – police brutality – is very much alive and in the national consciousness.

At the same time, the Panthers called for much more than an end to police brutality. They advocated for quality education, quality medical care, decent housing, exemption from military service, and a general anti-capitalist restructuring of society.

To borrow from Steve Wasserman, if we focus on the stories of the "supernovas" of the party, if we repeat the Oakland-centered narrative, we risk overshadowing the lesser-known stories of Panthers like Mondo and Ed. We forget that the BPP grew from an Oakland-based organization to a national party with chapters in almost every major city in the U.S. Like many others, the Omaha chapter addressed poverty and inequality at the local level, going beyond activism for self-defense. Mondo and Ed started a free breakfast program for schoolchildren and ran the Vivian Strong Liberation School, named after one of four unarmed Omaha teenagers killed by police in 1969.

How long would it take you to see that you heard something?

As I left the prison that afternoon, I realized that Mondo's words could be read as a commentary on his own political trajectory, both a validation of and a condemnation of his own movement from apprehension to articulation. I say condemnation because, in Mondo's eyes, he too long lived the straight and narrow. Mondo laughed, for instance, about his first foray into activism. As an eighteen-year-old — and still very much the good Catholic boy— he was part of a delegation of Omaha teenagers who met with Nebraska Governor Frank Morrison seeking his support for a bill prohibiting the sale of obscene literature to minors.

In 1966 (his senior year) Mondo was one of six black students at Creighton Prep and on the verge of realizing, after attending homecoming with his white girlfriend and earning the ire of teachers and peers, that he wasn't just one of the boys. A class clown, he never lost his sense of humor, or resisted repeating a good pun, but that year the middle-class boy who played football and promoted sock hops and speech meets as a member of the Poster Club began to funnel his energies into more heady pursuits: into organizing, into writing. He ran a poetry group as a young man in his early twenties. On Saturdays he and five others would meet at a coffee-shop. There they would discuss Beat poetry and write in books with blank pages. Sometimes Mondo and a friend would get to ab-libbing poetry back and forth, neither wanting to be the first to pause, stumped. "If we'd start to lose momentum, to get it back, he would shout 'while wallowing in the depths of poverty' and then I'd jump in and that would get it started again," Mondo told me, laughing as he recalled his friend's go-to line. One of Mondo's best early poems is an elegy for Vivian Strong.

The ideology of the Black Panther Party articulated something for Mondo that he had always felt, but hadn't yet learned the language to express. How long does it take you to see that you've heard something? Seeing was linking lived experience to discourse. Hearing precedes sight. Mondo was politically engaged until the end, sharp even in sickness.

The late 1960s and early 70s saw a surge in politically-driven poetry that challenged complacency within unjust systems. The BPP's national newsletter regularly published poetry. It was common for Panthers to perform poems at meetings or functions, spitting out bold, revolutionary sentiments, their gymnastic wordplay prefiguring hip hop and modern rap. "Poems are bullshit," Amiri Baraka wrote, "unless they are teeth."

Two weeks before his death, Mondo mailed out a copy of what would be his final poem, called "When It Gets To This Point." It begins:

Michael Brown?
I had never heard of him
had never heard of anything he'd done
before the news of his death came
whoever he might have become
whatever he might have achieved
had he lived longer
not been riddled lifeless by
bullets from Darren Wilson's gun
and crumpled on the pavement of a ferguson street
for more than four hours in
the heat of that august day
and before
I'd never known of Trayvon Martin
had known nothing of who he was
until I learned of his demise

and cause of death
a bullet to the chest
George Zimmerman, the shooter
a badge-less, pretend police
with a pistol
and fear of the darkness
Trayvon's darkness
and after a while
the pictures, the names,
the circumstances
run together
like so much colored laundry in the wash
that bleeds on whites
was it Eric Garner or Tamir Rice
who was twelve but seen as twenty
Hulk Hogan or The Hulk
with demonic eyes it was said
who shrank the cop in ferguson
into a five-year-old who
had to shoot
and John Crawford the third
in a walmart store aisle
an air rifle in his hands he'd picked up
from the shelf
and held in the open
in an open-carry state
was it John or someone else
killed supposedly by mistake
in a dark stairwell
I know Akai Gurley fell
I hadn't heard of him before
nor of Amadou Diallo or Sean Bell
prior to their killings
which of these two took slugs in the greater number
I don't recall
my memory is too encumbered
with the names
of so many before and since

Much of Mondo's poetry critiqued police power within the U.S. But, like the Panthers, his scope was broad. Like the Panthers, he called for the internationalization of black struggle and aligned himself with third world liberation movements. Many of his poems have a Pan-African and anti-imperialist bent.

In "I Don't Step in the Water," the final poem in his 2012 collection, *The Black Panther is an African Cat*, Mondo writes:

There is a place
between the building I'm caged in
and the one where the slop is served
where when it rains

two puddles form
puddles that form a map
of Africa
I do not splash through
but walk around
out of respect.

Mondo's ashes are now in Tanzania, where former Panther Pete O'Neal lives in exile with his wife, Charlotte, also a former Kansas City Panther. One of their students volunteered to carry Mondo's ashes to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

At Mondo's service, former inmates and friends shared their favorite memories, how he hated shoes and once during a meetings of Harambe, an African cultural organization for inmates, went without: barefoot, elfin, talking a mile a minute. For once the guards let him get away with it. When Mondo turned himself in he was wearing a dark t-shirt, beige pants, and sandals, the only footwear he could tolerate, a choice that seemed inappropriate given the gravity of his situation. The newspaper picture capturing the moment suddenly seemed retroactively funny.

There was anger, too. I learned that once he refused to wear socks to the cafeteria. This, in combination with an earlier offense (giving his meat to another inmate) led to a parole hearing being postponed for five years. Everyone who spoke talked about how productive he was, how he mentored younger inmates, taught classes in African history, how he still managed to contribute to society despite being incarcerated, how his poems would live. But I don't know that I can get on board with such optimism. I would have preferred him to live. I would have preferred him to walk free, to have made it to Tanzania, alive.

Still, I like to picture Mondo at eighteen years old, the way he described himself and the way he looked in pictures: small for his age and hunched over on the carpet in his room, where he can stay for up to four or five hours alone. He's scrawling furiously on a yellow pad. Like a singer overcome with the raw emotion behind his own song, he lets his eyes fill with tears. Then laughs, started at a turn of phrase. At his own turn of phrase. At his own ability to create.

Maybe part of the reason he'll stick with his poetry is vanity, an unarticulated desire to differentiate himself from his peers through his ability to manipulate language. But a writer doesn't realize he's good at writing on the first try. There has to be something before that. It's a compulsion. Something that has to be written. In Mondo's case, call it a moral imperative.

Poetry as teeth.

Mondo was my subject, but in some ways he was also my friend. Or, more accurately, we were becoming friends at the time of his death, a death he denied, resenting the doctor's diagnosis and anyone who spoke to him of his failing health. There were things we didn't talk about. He regretted his white girlfriends. There were things I didn't want to talk about, but he did. He could be homophobic. He could be long-winded. There were things we both wanted to talk about. He waxed philosophical about Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook. He once wrote a song about how much he looked forward to his showers, a goofy ballad the guards in the infirmary knew well. He was too shy to sing it to me.

I wanted to write him out of there.

18 Mar - The Latest From Leonard Peltier

We are passing on the following from the International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee.

MORE:

We were notified this afternoon, that we are going on a lockdown, the whole institution, and the lockdown will be for at least 30 days. We were told we would be given 500 minutes for the phone, which is 200 minutes more than usual, so it doesn't sound like we will be in our cells. I don't know if we will be able to write letters or receive mail. I will not be visiting anyone if I survive that is for at least 30 days and the virus doesn't get into Coleman I.

As far as I know no one has the virus in USP Coleman complex.

I keep getting conflicting info. but we were allowed to go outside for the evening, and we are now on the inside flats. Maybe it is just visiting that have been cancelled. and there is no contact with outside peoples we or most of us anyway agree this needs to be done, because no one it seems knows if they have contacted the virus or not.

So as long as I can, I will send you updates as long as I can, I want to tell all of you to be safe out there as this virus is not racist and anyone can get it. If all possible please look out for the people in the Native Nations, if you know our history in these sorts of pandemics, Native people are the last to get help. and I have babies (grandchildren) out there.

19 Mar - If Social Distancing Is Impossible in Prisons, People Should Be Freed

So far, no state governor has responded to the call for releasing the most vulnerable people from prison.

MORE:

by Victoria Law (*Truthout*)

In early March, Michelle Tran drove 1,500 miles from her home in Wichita, Kansas, to visit her husband Thai at California's Avenal State Prison.

It's a trek that Tran makes every 45 to 60 days. She typically spends a week in California so that she can visit her husband for two weekends. During the week, she visits family in Fresno and drives to Los Angeles to check on Thai's mother, who is battling Stage IV cancer.

That first weekend, the couple sat at the small round tables in the prison's visiting room. They were able to hold hands, hug, kiss and eat snacks from the prison's vending machines. On Sunday, Tran ended their visit after two hours to drive to Sacramento for a Drop LWOP rally urging lawmakers to change laws and end sentences of life without the possibility of parole. The couple planned to say their goodbyes during her visit the following weekend.

That visit never happened. On Wednesday, March 11, Tran received a memo announcing that, to stem possible exposure to COVID-19, or the novel coronavirus, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation was canceling all visits until further notice.

"I traveled 1500 miles to see my husband for basically eight hours," recalled Tran. Despite her disappointment, she understands the need for caution, especially in a prison like Avenal where men live in dormitories with 200 beds and in a prison system which has long had problems with inadequate, substandard and even life-threatening medical care.

California is not the only prison system to cancel visits to stem possible exposure to COVID-19. Across the country, as health officials urge people to keep their distance and cities institute shutdowns of nonessential

businesses and issue orders to shelter in place, 47 state prison systems, the federal prison system and Immigration and Customs Enforcement prisons have canceled in-person visits. As of March 16, only Arkansas, Nebraska and Wyoming are still allowing visits in their state prisons.

“Given that social distancing has been the most effective preventive measure thus far for this rapidly spreading virus for which we have no vaccine, treatment or cure, it’s reasonable to believe that minimizing outside visitations can reduce the risk of transmission/exposure,” Lipi Roy, the former chief of addiction medicine for New York City’s jail system, told *Truthout*. “For the time being, we need to aggressively minimize exposure and optimize ALL preventive measures.”

But, she adds, the minimization or ban on visits should be temporary.

Social Distancing an Impossibility in Prisons

Jack Beck, a correctional health expert and former director of the Prison Visiting Project at the Correctional Association of New York, noted that suspending visits won’t prevent COVID-19 from entering state prisons. “In my view, the most likely way COVID-19 will enter prisons is through the jails,” he told *Truthout*. In 2018, over 19,000 people entered the New York state prison system. Many had previously been held in local jails where turnover and risks of exposure to COVID-19 as well as other viruses and diseases is high. “Even if they discover it [COVID-19] a week after [admission], that person will have spread it to a number of other people.”

On March 15, a New York City jail investigator became the first city worker to die from the COVID-19. Jail commissioner Cynthia Brann stated that, as an investigator, the man had limited contact with the incarcerated population. Two others, an incarcerated man and a correctional officer, at Rikers have also tested positive. In the state prison system, an employee at Sing Sing, one of New York’s maximum-security prisons, also tested positive for COVID-19.

Furthermore, Beck noted that prison policies make hygienic practices recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, such as washing hands frequently with soap and water, nearly impossible. Hand sanitizer, which has alcohol, is prohibited in prisons (though New York prisoners are manufacturing hand sanitizer for outside use, and are paid an average of 65 cents per hour). Many people are in cells without hot water and, sometimes, without working sinks.

At the same time, social distancing is impossible in a prison setting. “You can’t control who you’re interacting with,” Beck noted. At meal times, for instance, people are “herded into meal halls where they sit where someone else ate 15 minutes ago. But that area hasn’t been sterilized.”

That’s true in Michigan as well. “Tara,” imprisoned in Michigan’s sole women’s prison, told *Truthout* that, although two of the prison’s 36 housing units have been quarantined because of women with flu-like symptoms, women still go to the cafeteria together with the quarantined women going after those in general population. “When I asked security, ‘Isn’t this a crowd over 100?’ they called me smarty pants,” she stated.

Texas prisons have also not reported any cases of COVID-19. But “Coretta,” currently imprisoned in Texas, worries that exposure will come from a staff member. In a letter to *Truthout*, she wrote, “these COs [correctional officers] are always sick. They are constantly coughing and sneezing.”

“Coretta” is in the prison’s restricted housing unit, where she and others are locked in their cells nearly 24 hours each day. But even in isolation, incarcerated people are at risk for exposure. Prison policy dictates that officers conduct cell inspections every three days. “They take us out of our cell — handcuffed,” she

described. “They enter, flush our toilets, turn on the faucets, hit the walls with a black rubber mallet, then return us to the cell. When we are waiting beside our cell door, there [are] two officers, one on each side, holding each arm. They’re coughing and sneezing. I’m fussing, ‘Sneeze in your elbow! Use that Purell before you touch me!’”

Indiana prisons have not reported cases of COVID-19. It’s only a matter of time though, wrote Sarah Pender, currently imprisoned at the women’s Rockville Correctional Facility, in an e-message to *Truthout*. “We understand that when it comes here, we will not get any kind of treatment except Tylenol and temperature monitoring. We will suffer, and there will be people who die. There are several women who have compromised immune systems, are diabetic, who have lung issues, or are over 60. Since the death rate is 2 to 3 percent, that means we will inevitably have some deaths here.”

In another e-message, Pender added, “I don’t want to think about what they will do with women who need ICU treatment or ventilators. We only have 13 beds in the infirmary, and only one isolation room. I hope we don’t have to find out.”

Video Visits Can’t Replace In-Person Visits. What Next?

For the past three years, Donna Robinson has traveled over 400 miles from her home in Buffalo, New York, to visit her daughter Missy, who is serving a 15 years-to-life sentence at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Robinson has no car, so she must travel from Buffalo to New York City where she then boards a Metro-North train. Once at Bedford Hills, she takes a five-minute taxi ride to the prison.

The last time she visited Missy was in late January. By then, cases of COVID-19 had already been confirmed outside of China and the World Health Organization was days away from declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In the prison visiting room, however, there was no hand sanitizer or soap for visitors or their incarcerated loved ones.

Even before New York suspended prison visits on March 13, Robinson, now age 64, realized that she could no longer visit. “I’m in the high-risk category,” she told *Truthout*. “I’m over 60. I have a lowered immune system. I have diabetes.”

New York prisons offer video visits (or televisits) and, in some cities such as Buffalo and New York City, have satellite locations where family members can video visit with their loved ones for free. Robinson has signed up for video visits and is now awaiting both approval and information on where she can go to access these visits for free. Video visits will never take the place of in-person visits, Robinson acknowledges. “There’s nothing like that hug,” she said. During their six-hour visits, mother and daughter play Uno, eat food from the prison vending machines, and take pictures together. Now, she and Missy stay in touch by phone at the cost of 43 cents per minute.

Advocates Demand Free Video Visits and Calls

At 10 cents per minute, the cost of prison phone calls in Massachusetts is less than a quarter of the cost of calls in New York state. Even so, many families struggle with the cost of staying in contact with their incarcerated loved ones.

Rep. Ayanna Pressley knows about these difficulties. Her father was in and out of prison throughout her childhood. As an adult, Pressley married a man who had served 10 years in prison. Though Conan Harris had already been released and successfully rebuilt his life in Boston by the time they met and married,

hearing about his struggles gave the lawmaker insight into the challenges faced by many families, including the high price to stay connected.

“Any avenue to maintain familial bonds should be free,” Pressley said in a webinar about COVID-19 and the prison system. “If visits are going to be cancelled as a strategy of containment, then video conferencing and phone calls should be free.”

Jack Beck noted that phone time is already limited and, with visits canceled, there will be greater demand for the limited number of phones inside the prison. At the same time, calls continue to be restricted to small blocks of time, typically 15 to 20 minutes.

For Cat Perkins and her husband Gary, that 15-minute call ends way too quickly. “He always asks, ‘Why do those 15 minutes go by so fast?’” Perkins told *Truthout*. Her husband is in Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, California, where 2,733 people are incarcerated in a prison designed for 1,738 people. Many of the men around him cannot afford phone calls or have families in other countries, so Gary does not face longer phone lines. Nonetheless, Perkins pays \$1.30 for a 15-minute call, a sharp decrease from the previous \$5 per call.

In Georgia, a 15-minute phone call ranges from \$1.95 to \$2.40, depending on the distance. That’s now the only way that Cynthia Holland can stay in touch with her daughter Michelle, who is serving a life sentence at Georgia’s Arrendale State Prison.

For the past 11 years, Holland has visited Michelle every weekend, driving the 90 miles from her home in Atlanta. Now, like Robinson and Missy in New York and families across the country, the two must rely on phone calls and e-messages.

But Holland now gets fewer phone calls from Michelle. “It makes you worry more,” she told *Truthout*. She has avoided using video visits because of the cost (33 cents per minute as of 2016). “If it [the ban on visits] goes on too long, I guess I’ll have to start,” she said. She, too, thinks that prisons should decrease the cost of video visits and phone calls, especially while visits are suspended. (The company JPay, which provides e-messages for Georgia prisons, has stated that it will now provide two free e-messages per week while visits are suspended.)

Michelle Tran spends between \$100 to \$150 each month for phone calls and knows many family members who spend twice that amount. She expects that, as businesses close and employees lose paychecks and possibly jobs in attempts to prevent COVID-19 exposure, the cost of prison calls will become increasingly prohibitive. That, in turn, adds to the stress of not being able to see an incarcerated loved one. She thinks prison phone companies should offer free calls during this time. “We know it’s a billion-dollar industry,” she reflected.

In some states, prisons and private contractors are offering reduced rates to keep in touch. In New York, while visits are suspended, incarcerated people will receive five free postage stamps, two free e-messages and one free phone call per week. Incarcerated people in Connecticut will receive two free phone calls each week. Illinois prisons are allowing two free 20-minute calls and one free video visit during this time. This is not a weekly offer, noted Alexis Mansfield of the Women’s Justice Institute. Mansfield also noted that Illinois prisons do not have enough phones to meet demand even during non-pandemic times.

Officials in Shelby County, Tennessee, announced that they would waive all fees for phone calls and video visits in its jails. Utah prison officials are offering 10 free 15-minute phone calls per week. On March 17, California followed suit, announcing that prison phone calls will be free from March 19 to March 26. At

Chuckawalla Valley, however, people were issued a memo stating that they would only be allowed free phone calls on March 19 and March 26, not continually throughout that week. For many inside that prison, even two days of free calls was a boon. In his nightly call on March 18, Perkins's husband told her that men had started lining up at 6 pm so that they could call their families for free once midnight struck.

However, many other state prisons — and the private telecommunications companies with which they contract — have been slow to offer similar cost reductions.

“We Need to Start From the Framework of Release, Not Hand Sanitizers”

Meanwhile, at least one other country is taking more dramatic steps in the face of the virus: Iran temporarily released 85,000 prisoners to slow the spread of COVID-19.

In the United States, advocates in Indiana, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, California and New York are demanding that their states do the same. They have issued open letters to their respective governors calling on them to release people who are most vulnerable, including people who are over the age of 60 and/or medically fragile.

Cat Perkins's husband Gary, age 56, does not fall into either category. Nonetheless, she's advocating that California Gov. Gavin Newsom consider early release for people who are over age 60, medically fragile or have anticipated release dates in 2020 or 2021.

“We have a lot of inmates who are sickly. Why not release them?” she asked. She notes that her husband, who has been incarcerated since 1986 and is serving a life without parole sentence, is no longer the same man that he was at age 22. The same holds true for the many other people who have spent decades in prison. “They’ve done 30, 40 years. Why not give them a little bit of freedom?”

Across the country, in New York, Donna Robinson, a member of Release Aging People in Prison, has joined the call for Gov. Andrew Cuomo to release incarcerated people who are most vulnerable to COVID-19. That would not affect her daughter Missy, now in her 40s, but Robinson remembers — and is still outraged by — the death of 61-year-old Valerie Gaiter. Gaiter was 40 years into a 50-to-life sentence and 10 years from her first parole hearing when she died of esophageal cancer. “That could be my daughter dying behind bars at the age of 61 after complaining about pain for a year,” Robinson reflected.

No governors have yet responded to this call for releasing the most vulnerable people.

On the city level, however, judges, jail officials, jail oversight monitors and even prosecutors are considering mass release as a way to slow exposure. In Chicago, the Cook County sheriff's office has already released several people who were determined to be at higher risk, including a pregnant person and a person who had been hospitalized for treatment not related to coronavirus.

The Los Angeles sheriff's department and judges in Cleveland are considering doing the same. In New York City, the Board of Correction, which oversees conditions in the city's jails, recommended the immediate release of people over age 50, those with underlying health conditions, people detained for technical violations of probation or parole, and those sentenced to less than one year behind bars.

Thirty-one prosecutors, in places ranging from San Francisco and Brooklyn to Mississippi and Alabama, issued a joint statement pledging to reduce the numbers held in jails by releasing people detained because they can't afford cash bail, those with six months or less to serve, and people considered at high risk for COVID-19.

Not every county official is taking measures to reduce the flow of people into jails and prisons. Andrea James, co-founder of the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, stated that a federal judge recently denied a motion from a woman who was scheduled to self-surrender and begin her prison sentence. The woman, said James, has a severely compromised immune system, recently underwent surgery, and is about to begin chemotherapy.

“We need to start from the framework of release, not hand sanitizers,” said James.

25 Mar – COVID-19 and Incarceration

WHAT: Forum

WHEN: Wednesday, March 25th

WHERE: Your place + the Internet

COST: FREE

MORE:

Join us for a statewide virtual forum on COVID-19 and incarceration. Elders in prisons across New York State are at serious risk. We need all hands on deck to push for #ClemencyNow and to #FreeOurElders

RSVP at

docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfKHJtIdqVmO1hKegw4_3aC6aaQo3o1SjHSgUrPNpC5nsABDg/viewform