



The Honorable Mitch McConnell
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

March 21, 2020

RE: Incarcerated people must be protected from COVID-19

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leaders Schumer and McCarthy:

As Congress prepares to pass its third stimulus package in response to the devastating consequences of the novel coronavirus in the United States, the [Justice Roundtable](#) urges you to incorporate provisions in that bill to protect the health and safety of incarcerated people and corrections workers.

On March 17 *The Washington Post* published commentary by prominent physicians and correctional health experts that described the urgency of the situation we face:

“Unless government officials act now, the novel coronavirus will spread rapidly in our jails and prisons, endangering not only prisoners and corrections workers but the general public as well. As the country prepares for further spread of the pandemic, authorities should take immediate steps to limit the risk posed by mass confinement, including releasing those detained on bail, along with elderly prisoners who pose little danger to the public.”¹

U.S. prisons and jails face a public health catastrophe due to existing unsanitary and overcrowded conditions of confinement and the large number of incarcerated people who are elderly or have significant health problems. To date little has been done to address the unique risks faced by those who live and work in correctional facilities. The time is now to tack action. Justice Roundtable’s [recommendations](#) to Congress include:

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/17/we-must-release-prisoners-lessen-spread-coronavirus/>

- Fund COVID-19 testing, prevention, care, and treatment services at no cost to those who are incarcerated or detained.
- Support federal, state, and local prisons, jails, detention centers, and secure confinement facilities in following CDC recommendations in the COVID-19 response.
- Incentivize federal, state and local law enforcement to avoid detention of any new arrestee unless they pose a risk of serious injury to a reasonably identifiable person.
- Incentivize federal, state and local officials to release people from incarceration in order to prevent the spread of disease and reduce the threat of infections among incarcerated people at highest risk of serious illness and death from COVID-19, particularly people over age 50, those with chronic illnesses, pregnant people, those with asthma, cancer, heart disease, lung disease, and diabetes, HIV and other diseases or disabilities that make them vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Fund federal, state, and local corrections officials and other stakeholders to support transition planning for youth and adults prior to release from prisons, jail, detention, and secure confinement facilities to ensure connection to critical community-based services upon release.

Stemming the spread of COVID-19 is the country's top priority but this will not be accomplished if we ignore the pandemic's impact on people working and living in correctional facilities. Congress must take immediate action to reduce the number of people detained by federal agencies, including the Bureau of Prisons and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and incentivize states and localities to reduce their levels of youth and adult incarceration and detention in order to protect vulnerable populations from COVID-19. We look forward to working with you as the country seeks to control this crisis.

For more information please contact Jenny Collier (jcollier@colliercollective.org) or Kara Gotsch (kgotsch@sentencingproject.org).

Sincerely,

Nkechi Taifa
Convener of the Justice Roundtable