

POLICY PRINCIPLES:

Advocating for Life-Affirming Responses to COVID-19 Behind Bars

Preserving the health and dignity of incarcerated and detained people must not be forgotten. Political leaders at the federal, state, and local levels should consider the pressing needs of those who are currently or formerly in prison and detention during this time of the coronavirus outbreak. What follows are important areas for action:

Health and Safety of Inmates, Detainees, and Correctional and Detention Staff:

Ensure that those who are detained or incarcerated and staff have access to Personal Protective Equipment, sanitary basics such as soap and sanitizer, on-demand COVID-19 testing, free medical care for COVID-19 positive inmates and staff, and adequate data collection of testing results.

Overcrowding and Vulnerable Populations: Re-evaluate cash bail and bond programs to limit new admissions to jails and prisons; expand home confinement and early release for individuals approaching the end of their sentences; and immediately expand compassionate release programs for inmates in COVID-19 risk categories. In the immigrant detention context, look to release COVID-19 vulnerable populations and contemplate enrollment of other vulnerable populations, as well as verified asylum seekers, into the full spectrum of alternatives to detention. Reduce unnecessary transferring of detainees to other detention facilities.

Mental and Spiritual Well-Being of Those Incarcerated or Detained and Staff: Ensure that inmates have access to free, unlimited voice and video calls with family; provide tablets and other electronic devices and virtual programming to ensure inmates have access to legal services as well as educational, addiction, and mental health programming; support virtual chaplaincy ministry for inmates and staff; and, where possible, allow chaplains to return to in-facility ministry.

Successful Reentry into Society: Lift bans on programs like housing, SNAP, TANF, and other public assistance programs; provide additional funding and staff to help connect inmates to halfway houses, permanent housing, and employment; and provide additional funding for Second Chance Act programming which improves employment outcomes and reduces recidivism. Ensure access to COVID-19 testing and care for all regardless of immigration status. Ensure community organizations who provide post-release services are robustly funded for detainee stabilization after release from detention facilities.