



Prisoners' Legal Services

A Project of the West Coast Prison Justice Society

The Honourable Bill Blair
Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

April 9, 2020

Dear Mr. Blair:

RE: Depopulation of Penitentiaries during the COVID-19 Pandemic

I write on behalf of Prisoners' Legal Services to express our deep concern for the safety of prisoners and the public as the number of cases of COVID-19 inside penitentiaries is increasing rapidly by the day.

We urge you to use your ministerial discretion to immediately release all federal prisoners who currently have a low public safety security rating and who wish to be released, and to reassess prisoners with a moderate risk to public safety to determine whether or not they can be safely managed in the community with the appropriate conditions.

These measures would be consistent with public health recommendations to allow individuals to maintain social distancing in order to flatten the curve.

The urgency of stopping the spread of COVID-19 inside penitentiaries cannot be overstated. According to public health and preventative medicine expert Dr. Aaron Orkin¹, prisoners have higher rates of chronic disease and a higher chance of intensive-care admission or death when they contract this virus. He notes the most important public health measure to flatten the curve of COVID-19 is social distancing, and that other recommended measures are much less effective, especially in the prison environment.

¹ <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaid%3Aacd%3AUS%3Aa9ecea53-cd4c-4ccb-9f00-d8899fbd35f2>.

In Dr. Orkin’s opinion, preventing outbreaks in environments like prisons is a top public health priority because they happen extremely quickly and may be impossible to control once they occur. He warns that staff who work in these environments will then spread the virus into the broader community. He says the “only available method to substantially reduce the resulting infections and deaths is therefore to reduce the population in those settings.”

Dr. Orkin stresses the importance of reducing the prison population, especially of those who are healthy and can self-isolate at home, in order to reduce the risk of infection for both prisoners and members of the community. He calls for an “aggressive approach” to depopulation of penitentiaries.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours truly,

PRISONERS’ LEGAL SERVICES

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jennifer Metcalfe', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jennifer Metcalfe
Barrister & Solicitor
Executive Director