

The Star-Ledger

700 N.J. inmates have been freed during coronavirus crisis. Some could wind up homeless.

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published March 28, 2020

John Mele was cleaning the inside of the Ocean County Jail Tuesday morning when a guard called his name.

The 48-year-old had heard on the news that some inmates might be released because of the coronavirus crisis. But he was stunned to be handed bus tickets just hours after he'd woken up.

"I am happy that I'm out of jail," he said Thursday, while sitting in a Lyndhurst park. "I'm not happy that I'm homeless."

Mele was one of more than 700 county jail inmates cleared for release this week around the state, hundreds more than previously reported, according to new data from the American Civil Liberties Union in New Jersey.

The unprecedented move to head off a possible coronavirus outbreak behind bars has brought new challenges for both those released and the people tasked with caring for them.

A Supreme Court order initially flagged nearly 800 low-level offenders to be set free, according to the data, but county prosecutors objected to 260 of those. Judges overruled prosecutors 171 times, according to the data, but agreed to keep 81 people detained. Two dozen cases are still pending appeal.

Amanda Leese, who helps oversee prisoner reentry for the Camden-based Volunteers of America Delaware Valley, found out Sunday night that inmates at several South Jersey jails would be leaving in the next 48 hours.

"The biggest struggle was that we couldn't be in the facility doing the screening in person," Leese said, although jails were able to get them information about who needed rides, beds and groceries.

Inmates were checked for COVID-19 symptoms before they left, she said, and many were then loaded into 15-passenger vans. Only one person was allowed per row, she said, and vans were cleaned after every pickup.

Checkups from social workers and substance abuse counselors have moved to phone, Volunteers of America employees said. The group is trying to move some job training online, but not everyone has a computer.

“When all of this lifts,” Leese said, “we have a group of individuals that were released with minimal notice that are gonna need the job training and the employment placement and the treatment options that we still offer.”

Many former inmates are safe, officials have said, but at least one young man overdosed the night he got out and was ordered back to jail, according to New Jersey Public Defender Joseph Krakora. He was the only one returned so far, according to the data.

“Reentry is hard in the best of times,” said former Gov. Jim McGreevey, who leads the nonprofit New Jersey Reentry Corporation. A lack of housing, health care and jobs makes it even more difficult, he said.

Five Republican lawmakers and at least one Democratic county official released statements this week criticizing the release.

The court order was “lunacy,” state Sen. Declan O’Scanlon, R-Monmouth, said in a Thursday statement with two Assembly colleagues. Jail populations were already down because of bail reform and drug court, they said, which should allow “social distancing” behind bars.

“We should not be putting them back out into society and asking that they distance themselves,” they said.

In an interview Thursday, state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal reiterated that this was the best of bad options. An outbreak behind bars could be catastrophic for everybody, he said, and he warned the newly freed to not even run a red light.

“I am going to hold them accountable,” Grewal said. “On the other side of this emergency, I will make sure that the two months they had left on their sentence turns out to be another year if they went out there and committed additional crimes.”

Mele, the former Ocean inmate, stayed in a motel for two nights that his girlfriend paid for. But her job cutting hair is gone amid the statewide shutdown, he said, and she can’t pay for more. He said this was the first time in his life he didn’t have housing.

Mele’s been in and out of jail for drug, robbery and traffic charges, according to court records, and he had about three months left on his current sentence after being charged with burglary, theft and driving with a suspended license in June. A judge will decide whether he’ll finish that sentence in jail later, according to release paperwork he received from Ocean County. (The jail did not return requests for comment.)

The New Jersey Reentry Corporation is helping him find housing, but he’s also worried about others who left with him that he doesn’t think have places to sleep. The added stress of an airborne virus could make them even more desperate, he said.

“What do you do if you’re homeless and your back’s against the wall?” he said.