

The Star-Ledger

1,100 inmates could soon be released from N.J. prisons as coronavirus death toll rises

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

Published April 21, 2020

New Jersey officials are considering releasing up to 1,105 prisoners as the coronavirus death toll rises behind bars, but none have been set free so far.

Each inmate under review is at least 60 years old or has a health condition putting them at extra risk, according to corrections spokesman Matthew Schuman. Those denied parole in the past year or set to be released within the next three months may also be temporarily sent home.

Anyone convicted of murder, sexual assault or other serious crimes is not eligible, and no one is guaranteed release, according to the executive order signed by Gov. Phil Murphy April 10.

At least 15 inmates have died of COVID-19, according to the department's public statistics, and the virus has spread to every prison in the state. More than 370 officers and 82 prisoners have tested positive, but few are being tested.

New Jersey oversees about 18,000 inmates overall, many of whom live in near-capacity prisons.

The order requires officials to create a series of lists of potentially eligible inmates.

After each list is created, county prosecutors and the state attorney general's office have five days weigh in, and a newly created Emergency Medical Review Committee has seven days to make recommendations for each prisoner.

State Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks then has three days to make a final decision, according to the order.

Those released to their homes will likely not be allowed to travel far and may have ankle bracelets, and their relatives and any victims must be notified. The department must also help inmates sign up for services they need, such as Medicaid.

The review committee is co-chaired by Suzanne Lawrence, with the corrections department, and Steve Tallard with the parole board, according to Schuman.

About 700 county jail inmates were already released last month.