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Booker wants Murphy to release more inmates as N.J. has highest coronavirus prison death rate

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U.S. Sen. Cory Booker wants Gov. Phil Murphy to release more inmates from New Jersey prisons, which now have the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation.

The New Jersey Democratic senator and six House Democrats asked Murphy and the governors of five other states to use their “clemency and emergency powers” to lower prison populations, according to a Tuesday letter obtained by NJ Advance Media.

“With the stroke of a pen, you could help save the lives of tens of thousands of juveniles, elderly and medically vulnerable people held in custody,” Booker and other lawmakers wrote.

While Murphy has given the green light to potentially release more than 1,000 inmates, especially those at least 60 years old with health conditions, fewer than 100 had been temporarily set free by Friday. Anyone who committed a violent crime is ineligible.

Booker’s request goes further by asking the state to release anyone at least 50 years old and all juveniles, “irrespective of the offense,” as long as they “don’t pose a reasonable risk to public safety.”

Almost 3,300 inmates were at least 50 years old at the start of the year, according to the corrections department.

In a statement Wednesday afternoon, Booker spokesman Thomas Pietrykoski added that the letter was “by no means a criticism of Governor Murphy’s actions on this issue — to the contrary, our governor has shown incredible leadership in responding to this crisis by seeking to move the most vulnerable New Jersey inmates to community supervision.”

Pietrykoski said “more states — particularly those hardest hit — need to be doing more of what Governor Murphy has already been doing.”

Murphy’s office did not immediately return a request for comment.

At least 37 New Jersey inmates have died of the virus, according to state data, and those deaths likely represent thousands of untested infections behind bars, because public health experts estimate the virus kills about 1% of cases.

Experts have also warned that New Jersey’s near-capacity prisons threaten neighborhoods everywhere, because prisons can act as “reservoirs” for “epidemic

resurgence,” incubators allowing COVID-19 to be kept alive and carried outside by inmates and officers.

In the letter, the lawmakers cited a recent study by the American Civil Liberties Union that estimates the nation’s overall death toll could be dramatically lowered if prisons and jails reduce populations.

“We cannot flatten the curve while we continue to allow overcrowded prisons, jails, and detention centers to be vectors of infections,” the lawmakers wrote.

The state oversees about 18,000 inmates in the adult system and more than 280 people in the juvenile system. New Jersey began mass testing all juveniles last week and plans to begin testing all adult inmates this week.

Tuesday’s letter was also addressed to the governors of New York, Maryland, Massachusetts, Illinois and California.

Booker has previously introduced legislation to test and release prisoners around the country, including a bill to release many federal inmates.

Booker was joined by six colleagues in the U.S. House of Representatives, including New York’s Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.