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Protesters demand reforms from Murphy as N.J. prisoners continue to die amid pandemic

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Protesters formed a funeral procession in Trenton on Thursday to call attention to deaths within New Jersey's prison system and demand Gov. Phil Murphy do more to stop the coronavirus spreading behind bars.

Two more inmates died this week, according to court records, in a state that already has the highest coronavirus prisoner death rate in the nation.

The protest was organized by a coalition of churches and social justice and civil rights organizations, including the nonprofit Salvation and Social Justice.

"This situation is not beyond redemption," Rev. Charles Boyer, pastor of Bethel AME Church in Woodbury and founding director of the nonprofit, said in an interview. Although some in Murphy's administration showed "gross indifference" and "vast ignorance" to prison conditions, he said, the governor could still unilaterally free some sick and elderly inmates, and anyone incarcerated solely for drug offenses.

The governor should also support proposed legislation that would reduce people's sentences across the board, Boyer said, which could lead to the release of thousands. Initial paperwork for the bill (S2519) was filed Thursday.

About 450 vehicles showed up Thursday morning despite the rain, organizers said.

Orange "Funeral" tags hung from rearview mirrors. Drivers taped white paper with dead prisoners' names to doors, along with the hashtag, "#SayTheirNames," a demand for Murphy to acknowledge people who have died.

Around 12:30, a hearse led a line of cars from the Hughes Justice Complex to the War Memorial, the site of Murphy's afternoon briefings.

Inside, the governor acknowledged he has not memorialized individual inmates during press conferences, but said he still grieved their deaths.

"I mourn the loss of every single life in this state, period, full stop," Murphy said.

Murphy spokesman Jerrel Harvey declined to comment on any pending litigation, but he wrote in an email that "the Administration continues to evaluate the processes in place to protect at-risk populations in our correctional facilities."

The state Supreme Court is weighing releasing more prisoners, and documents filed with the court Thursday gave a more in-depth look at the state of the pandemic behind bars.

Forty-five inmates have died with the coronavirus, two more than the corrections department acknowledged online as of Thursday afternoon, according to the state attorney general's office.

There were 141 hospitalizations in April and 51 so far in May, according to the records.

More than half of the approximately 18,000 inmates and 8,000 staff have received tests. Almost 1,600 prisoners tested positive so far.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Joe Atmonavage contributed to this report.