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N.J. lawmakers approve bill to release more prisoners early during coronavirus crisis

By Blake Nelson

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A bipartisan group of New Jersey lawmakers approved a proposal Thursday that could free thousands of inmates early, while slamming how Gov. Phil Murphy's administration has handled the coronavirus behind bars.

The state Senate commerce committee unanimously voted for a bill (S2519) that would reduce sentences for some prisoners, in light of a pandemic that infected thousands of inmates and staff, killed more than 50 people and given New Jersey prisons the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation.

The committee includes three Democrats and two Republicans. The full Senate and state Assembly must approve the proposal before it can head to the governor.

"This bill takes a very, very mild approach," state Sen. Gerald Cardinale, R-Bergen, said at the hearing. "We should be looking very seriously at changing the whole administration of our prison system, because they just can't get it right."

New Jersey failed to protect its prisoners, said state Sen. Nellie Pou, D-Passaic, who sponsored the bill with Democratic colleagues.

Early releases "would not only give them security," she said in a statement, but "provide for a greater ability to socially distance, and keep everyone, guards included, safer."

Victims would be notified of an early release, according to amendments made since the bill was first debated. Victims would also have the option of blocking contact with a former inmate for the length of the original prison sentence.

Nobody testified against the proposal Thursday. A lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey was the only person to give a statement in favor, although others noted their support.

The ACLU estimates thousands of people set to be released within a year could benefit. Under the bill, for every month spent behind bars during a public health emergency, someone's sentence would be reduced four months, although eight months is the maximum reduction.

Juveniles would be eligible, while "repetitive, compulsive" sex offenders would not.

Prison representatives did not attend this or a previous hearing. A spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A similar bill in the Assembly (A4235) was also approved by a committee earlier in the week.

Fewer than 300 people have been temporarily released to their homes because of the pandemic, according to state data, although the prison population overall has dropped by almost a tenth since March, according to analysis of national data by the nonpartisan news organizations The Associated Press and The Marshall Project.

While there were more than 18,400 inmates four months ago, there were 16,613 on June 16, according to the data.

An NJ Advance Media investigation found systemic failures to contain the virus in the early days of the pandemic.