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Thousands of N.J. inmates could be released soon. But funding to keep them from returning to prison has been cut.

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On the eve of what could be the largest prisoner release in modern state history, New Jersey has cut funding for programs that help former inmates find jobs and housing.

Millions of dollars approved last year for reentry programs were left out of an emergency three-month budget approved earlier this summer, and it's an open question whether funding will be restored when a new budget is finalized next month.

That could affect thousands of people who will likely be set free early if lawmakers approve a first-in-the-nation proposal (S2519) reducing sentences, an effort to save lives in a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the country.

"It's a disaster for us," said Dan Lombardo, president of the Camden-based Volunteers of America Delaware Valley.

The reentry organization doesn't have enough money to handle current releases, he said, much less hundreds of new people he estimated would be homeless.

Tracy James, who was released from Garden State Youth Correctional Facility last month after years behind bars, said he was offered almost no support from the prison system.

"When it's time to come back out, and we have nothing, then what?" James said. "That's why recidivism is a problem."

Recidivism is when former prisoners commit more crimes, and research has shown reentry programs can lower that risk.

Gov. Phil Murphy will introduce his next budget on Tuesday, and the Legislature will likely vote on the release bill two days later.

In June, the state slashed about \$1.4 million from funding the corrections department normally gave to halfway houses, almost 9% of what had been paid on average each quarter last year.

An additional \$11 million in grants in last year's budget for the New Jersey Reentry Corporation and Volunteers of America were also missing.

The state parole board also told Volunteers of America it needed to cut 17% of the money it had been paying the group for residential programs, according to a July 30 email obtained by NJ Advance Media.

“Of course, the New Jersey State Parole Board is impacted by budgetary cuts, along with all other state agencies,” spokesman Tony Ciavolella wrote in an email. “Still, we continue to move forward in working to accomplish our dual mission of ensuring public safety and helping support released individuals.”

Volunteers of America has closed two offices so far, and their substance abuse and mental health treatment programs were at risk, leaders said. The New Jersey Reentry Corporation has cut staff by 8%, according to former Gov. Jim McGreevey, who leads the nonprofit.

In some cases, the pandemic is causing fewer prisoners to use reentry services because of restrictions on gatherings and fears of infections. But the workload is undoubtedly about to increase.

If the release bill passes the state Legislature and is signed by the governor, inmates set to be freed within a year will have up to eight months knocked off their sentences. While “repetitive, compulsive” sex offenders would be ineligible, people convicted of other violent crimes could still be set free.

Releases would begin within weeks of the governor’s signature.

The bill would be the first time in the nation state lawmakers moved to head off coronavirus deaths behind bars by lowering prison populations, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, which estimates up to 3,000 prisoners could be affected. The union representing corrections officers believes the number to be even higher, closer to 3,800 early releases, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105.

Those numbers are around a fifth of the entire prison population. There were about 16,600 inmates mid-June, according to an analysis of national data by the nonpartisan news organizations The Associated Press and The Marshall Project.

That would be on top of the hundreds already set free ahead of schedule from county jails (through a court order) and state prisons (through an executive order), and in addition to other recent bills that could shrink prisons going forward.

Unions representing police and corrections officers have condemned the early release bill.

The proposal put “public safety is at risk,” the New Jersey Law Enforcement Supervisors Association wrote in a statement. Prisoners were safer behind bars, PBA leaders argued, especially since other early releases had made it easier to socially distance.

Leaders of reentry organizations said they weren’t necessarily opposed to more releases, but were fearful a lack of support could create a “refugee crisis.”

“I wouldn’t be shocked to see more people die from overdoses than die in prison from COVID,” said Volunteers of America Vice President Dan Sperrazza.

Alexander Shalom, a lawyer with the state’s ACLU, said he supported increased reentry funding. But even if the money was not restored, he said, existing reentry services still gave people a better shot to survive than if they stayed inside prisons where dozens have already died.

It does not appear early releases will bring immediate savings.

One prisoner costs about \$50,000 a year, but legislative researchers said early releases would not necessarily save taxpayers more than a few dollars a day because the prison system couldn’t immediately “lower bed space capacity and reduce its fixed costs.” A more concrete estimate was not available, researchers wrote in a fiscal note, “due to the failure of the Executive Branch” to provide any information.

Darcella Sessomes, an assistant commissioner with the corrections department, told some reentry groups Thursday that although inmate releases this year could be “record breaking,” there were “additional budget cuts levied on the department in ALL areas of spending,” according to an email obtained by NJ Advance Media.

McGreevey said he was optimistic funding would be restored after conversations with the governor’s office and legislative leaders.

Spokesmen for Murphy and the corrections department and representatives for Democrats in the state Senate and Assembly declined comment on the budget cuts.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Samantha Marcus contributed to this report.