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For thousands of N.J. prisoners, freedom hangs in balance as money debate breaks out

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A first-in-the nation proposal to potentially free thousands of prisoners early had looked like a sure thing.

Relatives and friends of inmates around the state said many prisoners had already been told they would be released mid-September, anticipating that a bill to reduce sentences for some during a public health emergency (S2519) would be approved by the Legislature and signed by the governor.

While it squeaked through the state Senate on Aug. 27, the proposal stalled in the Assembly, which won't meet again until Sept. 21. And if the bill is changed as some predict, it will take longer to reach Gov. Phil Murphy.

"We are hurt, angry and frustrated," said Jaime Bailey, whose fiancé is in South Wood State Prison. "What they've done is not right or fair to the inmates nor their families."

The delay exposed tensions between two groups often allied: Advocates for prisoners' rights and organizations that help inmates find jobs and housing.

Some lawmakers balked at supporting the bill after reentry organizations said budget cuts hindered their ability to care for new releases, according to Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, D-Hudson, who sponsored the Assembly version.

Mukherji previously said he would consider amending the bill to address some of those concerns, but the state Senate would have to re-approve any changes.

Advocates for the proposal called foul, saying a debate about funding should not keep thousands of people already nearing the end of their sentences inside a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation.

Angel Lopez, a 47-year-old inmate at the Tully Halfway House in Newark, said prison officials took exit photos of him and dozens of others last month in anticipation of a September release, but Lopez's corrections department online profile now shows a release date months later. What was the point of more funding if proven reentry programs letting him work and study had long been halted because of the pandemic, he asked.

"We're concerned about our safety," he said.

Another prisoner told NJ Advance Media he had already signed release paperwork and had his commissary account closed, which blocked him from ordering additional food. A

screenshot taken last month of his online profile showed his release date as Sept. 13, but that date had been bumped back months as of last week. The inmate spoke with NJ Advance Media on condition of anonymity out of fear of retribution.

Corrections spokesman Matthew Schuman confirmed that any prisoners told they would be released mid-September because of the presumed passage of the early release bill would have to wait until the proposal became law, or until their original release date.

In the meantime, lawmakers have until the end of the month to finalize a revised state budget.

Millions of dollars missing from the current emergency three-month budget would be restored to the New Jersey Reentry Corporation and Volunteers of America Delaware Valley, two prominent reentry groups, under the budget Gov. Phil Murphy proposed last month.

However, tens of millions would be slashed from the prison system under the proposal, which would have a trickle-down effect on reentry groups receiving funding from the corrections department, leaders said. Many of them rely on money given to halfway houses and community programs.

“We’re supposed to be that buffer between prison and the community, and we’re not being utilized, we haven’t been utilized,” said Helena Tome, who directs reentry services for the New Jersey Association on Correction.

The Trenton-based nonprofit is at risk of having to shutter two halfway houses, the Clinton House in Trenton and the Millicent Fenwick House in Paterson, as well as a drug treatment program for women, Tome said.

Recently released inmates have wept when they saw their first self-checkout machine in Walmart because it was so foreign, she said, and the proposed budget would hurt the group’s ability to help those people navigate a changed world.

The nonprofit Salvation and Social Justice said those concerns were overblown.

Rev. Amos Caley, the group’s prison oversight campaign director, wrote in a text blast the “financial beneficiaries of the current system are mobilizing in opposition” to the bill, and he asked residents to lobby lawmakers to vote for “Life and Humanity” over “greed and the status quo.”

The group also sent out a mass email warning of the “reentry industrial complex.”

Reentry organizations said they were not necessarily opposed to releasing people early — more than 3,000 prisoners could be affected according to one estimate — but leaders said they wanted to ensure inmates weren’t thrown outside with no support.

The debate left some feeling torn, like Gale Muhammad, leader of the Camden-based nonprofit Women Who Never Give-Up, which helps prisoners and their families.

“If you let all these people come home, you’re setting them up for failure if the resources aren’t there,” she said.

Some money could be saved by shuttering prisons as populations drop, and the president of Volunteers of America recently asked lawmakers if some of the prison system’s \$1 billion annual budget could be re-routed to reentry groups.

Last year, lawmakers demanded two prisons close, the Albert C. Wagner Youth Correctional Facility in Burlington County and the Central Reception and Assignment Facility in Trenton. While Wagner did shut down, the Trenton facility remains open, although it housed fewer than 700 people at the beginning of the year.

Treasury officials again floated the idea of closing the assignment facility during a budget briefing last month, but they offered no timeline.

During his recent budget address, Murphy said only that “we will continue re-evaluating our priorities and our approach to corrections and criminal justice, and take a scalpel to our budget for prisons to make investments that will allow us to get more people working outside of prison than inside.”

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