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Stalled plan to free thousands of N.J. prisoners early is back on track

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Last month, prison officials told many inmates they would be released early.

But the bill that would shorten sentences (S2519), an effort to stop more coronavirus deaths behind bars, stalled in the Legislature. One big reason was some lawmakers weren't convinced former inmates would have enough help finding housing and jobs.

Lawmakers are scheduled to vote on the proposal again Thursday, and proponents say compromises they're making and new legislation they've proposed should push it over the finish line.

"I'm optimistic we have the votes to pass this bill," said Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, D-Hudson, who sponsored the Assembly version.

The proposal will be amended to exclude anyone convicted of murder or aggravated sexual assault, Mukherji said, which could sway hesitant colleagues.

In addition, both Mukherji and the bill's Senate sponsor recently introduced legislation (S2933 and A4681) to send more prisoners to halfway houses.

Organizations that run halfway houses have said proposed budget cuts and other pandemic policies hindered their ability to care for current releases, much less thousands of new cases.

State Sen. Nellie Pou, D-Passaic, said those concerns pushed her to both introduce the new halfway house bill and to support giving more money to community programs.

And now millions of dollars of proposed cuts for halfway houses would be restored in the revised state budget currently under consideration.

Funding halfway houses was always important, Pou said, but bolstering those programs should also sway lawmakers concerned about early releases.

"This will certainly help to give them ease in supporting this other bill," Pou said.

New Jersey prisons have the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation. About 3,000 prisoners could be affected by the early release proposal, the first of its kind in the country, although previous estimates did not exclude murder and sexual assault convictions.

If it's approved Thursday and signed by the governor, releases could begin within weeks.

The halfway house bills have yet to be considered by a legislative committee, but they gained early praise from leaders of reentry organizations.

“We like the bills a lot,” said Dan Lombardo, president of the Camden-based Volunteers of America Delaware Valley. Making more people eligible for halfway houses could reduce the number of people who “max out,” or complete their sentences without support services, he said.

Maxing out can increase the risk someone commits another crime, research has shown.

“We are happy to see that there is support for utilizing a system proven to work,” Helena Tome, who directs reentry services for the New Jersey Association on Correction, wrote in an email.

Under the proposal, prisoners with two-and-a-half years left could be sent to a halfway house. Currently, the limit is two years.

Officials would also be directed to prioritize inmates affected by the early release bill.

Sex offenders, arsonists and anyone who poses “an undue risk to public safety” would be ineligible.

The prison system has purposely been sending fewer inmates to halfway houses in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19, and less than half of the state’s approximately 2,400 beds are currently filled, Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks recently testified.

Lawmakers are scheduled to vote on the new state budget Thursday.