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N.J. could soon free thousands of inmates from prisons where dozens died of COVID. It's now up to Murphy.

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The state Assembly passed a bill Thursday to potentially free thousands of New Jersey inmates early from a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation.

The proposal, S2519, cleared the Assembly in a 41-33 vote, with three abstentions after a brief debate, gaining just the minimum number of votes needed to pass the lower house.

A broader version was previously given the green light by the state Senate, and senators re-approved the new, more limited bill in a 22-15 vote Thursday afternoon.

Gov. Phil Murphy is expected to sign it into law, according to an administrative source who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

“If we don’t act now as policy makers, we will continue to have blood on our hands,” Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, D-Hudson, and one of the bill’s sponsors, said Wednesday. While the crisis within prisons isn’t nearly as dire as it was earlier in the pandemic, proponents say early releases are still necessary because the state could be hit with a second wave of COVID-19.

Assemblyman Christopher DePhillips, R-Bergen, disagreed.

Knocking months off people’s sentences was “counterproductive to the deterrent effect of punishment,” he said Thursday, especially since some inmates convicted of violent crimes were still eligible.

If the proposal is fully approved, the first releases should begin within 16 days of Murphy’s signature.

While the bill moved faster than some legislation, its winding path was still agonizing for those affected. Many inmates were even told they would get out earlier in the month when the bill looked like it would pass in August.

“Nobody can begin to understand how painful and devastating that was to us and to our families,” Nicole Guyette, an inmate at the Millicent Fenwick Halfway House in Paterson, said Wednesday on a conference call organized by the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey. Women packed their bags weeks ago in anticipation of release, Guyette said, and many still couldn’t bring themselves to unpack.

Protesters first demanded early releases in May as deaths mounted behind bars. The bill gained early bipartisan support, but some of those same supporters hesitated when organizations that help inmates find jobs and housing said they weren't equipped to support new releases.

Other lawmakers were concerned a former prisoner might commit a violent crime, Mukherji said, similar to how the convicted murderer Willie Horton assaulted more people in the 1980s, in a case that helped derail Michael Dukakis' presidential campaign.

As a result, proponents beefed up support for reentry groups and changed the bill to exclude anyone convicted of murder or aggravated sexual assault. That exclusion affects about 71 people who would otherwise be eligible, according to Mukherji and the ACLU-NJ.

The civil rights group said about 2,500 to 3,000 could still benefit from the legislation, which is unique in the nation. The number is close to a fifth of the current prison population.

Under the proposal, anyone with less than a year left could have up to eight months knocked off their sentence. Juveniles would be eligible and people on parole could also have time reduced, as long as their parole was not in the process of being revoked.

Reductions would continue on a rolling basis as long as the public health emergency continues.

"Repetitive, compulsive" sex offenders would also be excluded, and the bill bars former prisoners from contacting victims. Violating that rule could put someone back in prison for more than a year.