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2K N.J. prisoners to be released early the day after Election Day, sources say

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Gov. Phil Murphy will sign a bill that will release early thousands of New Jersey prisoners the day after the presidential election due to the danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, NJ Advance Media has learned.

Murphy plans to sign the proposal (S2519) on Oct. 19, so it takes effect Nov. 4, according to four sources briefed by administration officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

A sponsor of the bill, state Sen. Nellie Pou, D-Passaic, confirmed that timeline Wednesday

“I’m just happy that there appears to be progress,” Pou told NJ Advance Media.

About 2,000 people should be released Nov. 4, and about another 1,000 will be released during the following weeks through January, according to three of the sources.

Murphy officials privately announced the timeline Tuesday during calls with stakeholders.

The bill barely passed the state Legislature late last month.

The proposal knocks up to eight months off sentences, and people convicted of murder, aggravated sexual assault and “repetitive, compulsive” sex offenders are not eligible. The reductions will continue on a rolling basis as long as the public health emergency is in effect.

Advocates have argued the early releases are necessary to save lives from a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation, and families have been anxious to know when relatives might step outside.

“New Jersey has failed its prison population throughout the pandemic,” Pou said in a statement last month. “We heard heartbreaking testimony from family members of inmates who died from COVID-19 while in our custody because health needs were denied and social distancing was not possible.”

Representatives for the corrections department did not immediately respond to questions about which prisons would be releasing people and what steps were being taken to prepare for the early releases.

The prison system denied an NJ Advance Media records request for a list of eligible inmates.

One of the principle objections to the bill was that former prisoners might not have enough help finding jobs and housing amid a pandemic.

“The goal of the legislation is commendable,” said Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora, whose city will likely host some of the early releases. “However, unless the state invests in support services like job training, substance abuse treatment, and housing for returning citizens, then this effort will disproportionately effect underserved communities like Trenton.”

He added that a new local reentry program should help, and other similar organizations have been scrambling to prepare for a surge in cases.

The New Jersey Reentry Corporation is launching a donation drive Thursday in Newark to collect clothes and toiletries for the newly freed.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Sue Livio contributed to this report.