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Hundreds of N.J. prisoners expected to be released early are at risk of homelessness, records show

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More than 240 prisoners set to be freed early do not currently have a safe place to live once they are released, according to a document by the governor's office obtained by NJ Advance Media.

They are some of the 2,088 inmates expected to be freed after Gov. Phil Murphy signs a bill (S2519) reducing sentences in a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation. Murphy is expected to approve the proposal next week and it will take effect Nov. 4, the day after the election, sources previously told NJ Advance Media.

Those inmates in need of a place to stay will be on parole, which means state officials have a responsibility to help find them housing.

But the majority of people who will likely be released, more than 1,200, will not be on parole and therefore not under supervision, meaning the actual number at risk of homelessness could be higher, according to the Oct. 6 estimate.

"If an individual does not have a period of parole supervision, they are not required to provide an address to which they will be going," according to the document from Murphy's office. The corrections department will use "the person's last known address or prosecuting county" to alert local prosecutors, but "we cannot guarantee that the person will be returning to that exact address."

The document also provides the most detailed picture yet of where the newly released prisoners may be going.

The estimate says the number of people in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment is still unknown, and it notes that "a person's situation and needs can change rapidly, so the tallies here may be fluid."

"Releasing people from prison must be done in a responsible manner," Murphy spokesman Michael Zhadanovsky wrote in an email. The governor's office, corrections department and parole board were working with other offices and organizations "to identify areas of anticipated need and fill those gaps with necessary resources so that people can thrive in their communities," he said.

"We are taking a process that normally takes 6 months and compressing it into a very short timeframe and as such, we need to ensure that all agencies and stake holders are equipped to ensure a smooth process," Zhadanovsky wrote.

The prison system has been preparing to release thousands of people ahead of schedule since the summer, after lawmakers introduced legislation to take up to eight months off sentences due to the danger posed by COVID-19 behind bars. Anyone convicted of murder or aggravated sexual assault, and “repetitive, compulsive” sex offenders are not eligible. Early releases will continue on a rolling basis as long as the public health emergency remains in effect.

The bill passed last month after lawmakers restored millions of dollars in funding to re-entry organizations.

Nonprofits are planning to support former inmates who do not have access to parole services.

The New Jersey Reentry Corporation and Volunteers of America are collecting clothes and toiletries, and the nonprofit Salvation and Social Justice hosted a Zoom call Tuesday evening about how churches can help people re-enter society.

The bill also reduces the amount of time people currently on parole have to remain under supervision. About 1,388 people will also see their parole end Nov. 4, according to the estimate from Murphy’s office.