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Murphy signs bill to release thousands of N.J. prisoners early beginning the day after Election Day

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Gov. Phil Murphy signed a first-in-the nation bill Monday reducing sentences in a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the country — a move that will release at least 2,000 inmates beginning next month.

The law (S2519) takes effect in 16 days, meaning the first wave of releases will happen the day after Election Day. About 2,088 people are expected to be freed Nov. 4, according to an estimate from the governor's office. Around 1,000 more will also be released ahead of schedule in the following weeks through January, sources previously told NJ Advance Media.

Early releases will continue on a rolling basis as long as New Jersey's public health emergency remains in effect.

“Reducing our prison population will undoubtedly further our mission to combat COVID-19,” Murphy said in a statement. Although the infection rate has dropped and an earlier plan sent some inmates temporarily to their homes, the new reductions will “allow for even more social distancing,” he said.

Adult and juvenile inmates with less than a year left can have up to eight months knocked off their sentences under the law. Prisoners convicted of aggravated sexual assault, murder and “repetitive, compulsive” sex offenders are not eligible.

People currently on parole can also have their time reduced, and around 1,388 people will see supervision end Nov. 4, according to the estimate from Murphy's office.

At least 52 prisoners, two corrections officers and one prison nurse have died with the virus, according to officials and state data, and an NJ Advance Media investigation flagged problems with how officials responded to the virus behind bars.

Proponents said the new law will help corrections officers and neighborhoods statewide.

“If we can enhance public health and safety by releasing eligible prisoners who are getting out anyway, we can effectively help reduce the spread of the virus in these facilities and reduce risk to the community upon their release,” Raj Mukherji, Shavonda Sumter and Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, three Democratic sponsors of the Assembly version of the bill, said in a joint statement.

No other state has passed legislation to reduce sentences because of the pandemic, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey.

More than 800 of those set to be released the day after Election Day will be on parole, including more than 240 who do not have a safe place to live, according to Murphy's office.

"We've been working closely with our department of corrections and the state parole board, as well as nonprofits and advocacy groups to ensure that inmates will have access to housing and social services," Murphy lawyer Parimal Garg said Monday during the governor's coronavirus press briefing in Trenton.

Murphy added that housing was one part of a broader effort to help people reenter society.

"You cut down dramatically on recidivism, you cut down dramatically on life's challenges if you've got a plan that's wholistic, including where somebody's gonna live," Murphy said. "Recidivism" is when somebody convicted of a crime breaks the law again.

The majority of people set to be released Nov. 4 will not be under state supervision, meaning more could be at risk of homelessness. Reentry organization, churches and other groups have been preparing for weeks to help.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Matt Arco contributed to this report.