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Some N.J. inmates set to be released after Election Day have tested positive with COVID-19, memo says

By Blake Nelson and S.P. Sullivan

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Some New Jersey prisoners set to be released Wednesday have tested positive for the coronavirus, according to an internal corrections memo obtained by NJ Advance Media.

A “few COVID positive inmates” will be released Nov. 4, and any “in need of transportation to a train/bus station ... must be transported by the facility ‘alone’” or in a “cohort,” according to the document, which also instructs corrections officers to wear protective gear.

A corrections spokeswoman said 11 prisoners about to be set free had tested positive.

Each had a “personalized transportation plan” and none were “being released to transportation hubs,” Liz Velez wrote in an email.

“For example, some will be sent to parole placements where they will be medically isolated, others will be released to family, while others will be provided full transport by the Department to their residence,” she said, and inmates would be given masks “and other resources to help manage virus transmission.”

A copy of the memo was also published online by state Sen. Mike Testa, R-Cumberland, who questioned the plan.

“After all the governor’s bloviating, this ‘knucklehead’ action by his administration is completely hypocritical and a clear threat to public safety,” Testa said in a statement.

Gov. Phil Murphy recently signed a first-in-the-nation law reducing sentences in a prison system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation. People with less than a year left to serve can have up to eight months knocked off their sentences, but anyone convicted of murder, aggravated sexual assault and “repetitive, compulsive” sex offenders are not eligible.

The law requires prisons to release inmates whether or not they’re positive, Velez added.

About a fifth of juvenile and adults prisoners will be released starting early Wednesday. That amounts to about 2,261 adults Nov. 4, Velez estimated, higher than the governor’s office previously estimated.

Adults without rides will be dropped off at transit stations throughout the state, according to re-entry organizations, corrections sources and others briefed by Murphy’s administration.

Preparation has been hampered by a lack of information from the prison system, nonprofit leaders and prisoner rights advocates told NJ Advance Media.

Many groups that help former inmates find jobs and housing said they still do not know the names of who will be released, so a coalition of organizations is planning to wait outside prisons and at bus stations Wednesday, taking down information from anyone in need of housing or food while connecting them to places that can help.

The American Friends Service Committee said it will have volunteers at Newark Penn, handing out flyers with numbers to call.

Volunteers of America Delaware Valley is extending office hours and sending teams to drive around the state.

The New Jersey Re-entry Corporation had already collected more than 1,600 “pandemic survival kits” last week, packed with clothes and toiletries, and churches are preparing to house anyone without a place to sleep.

“If nothing else, we’re welcoming them home,” said Lydia Thornton, a former Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women inmate who now works with New Jersey Prison Justice Watch.

Antonne Henshaw, a former prisoner in Camden County who works with the Transformative Justice Initiative, said he was coordinating with local law enforcement to make sure new releases didn’t have outstanding warrants. Connecting prisoners with people who had also spent time behind bars was key to helping someone adjust to sudden freedom, he said, and to make sure Wednesday’s releases didn’t turn into a reason to keep other people locked up.

“We don’t want it to be used as a means of making a ‘Willie Horton’ moment, to slam the door on everybody that’s stuck in there,” he said, referring to the convicted murderer who assaulted people in the 1980s after he was released, in a case that helped derail Michael Dukakis’ presidential campaign.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Larry Higgs contributed to this report.