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N.J. is set to release thousands of inmates from prison early across the state throughout the day

By Blake Nelson and Joe Atmonavage

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Early Wednesday morning, hours after the nation's last polling places have closed, New Jersey is expected to begin letting out thousands of prisoners who are nearing the end of their sentences in the largest single-day release of inmates in recent state history.

Officials are releasing about 2,261 adults, according to a corrections spokeswoman, more than the governor's office previously estimated and fifty juveniles. The adult inmates are leaving a prison system that has recorded the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation.

Proponents have cast the new law as a necessary way to save lives after officials failed to protect dozens of inmates and several staff who died with COVID-19.

"As the virus spread we were not flexible enough to keep the people in our custody safe," state Sen. Nellie Pou, D-Passaic, and a sponsor of the bill said earlier this year.

The law knocks up to eight months off sentences, while excluding people convicted of murder, aggravated sexual assault and "repetitive, compulsive" sex offenders. No other state has passed similar legislation, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey.

Prisoners without rides will be bused to Newark Penn, Trenton Transit, Pennsauken Transit and other transportation hubs around the state, according to sources briefed by Murphy's administration.

Eleven inmates getting out have tested positive for coronavirus, but officials said none will be taken to public trains or buses.

There were a handful of cars with family members and volunteers in the parking lot at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility at 7 a.m. on Wednesday, anticipating the release of inmates from the all-women's prison.

Pastor Pam Jones, director of Communities in Cooperation, a non-profit reentry program, went from car to car gathering names of inmates set to be released. Jones said they will be connecting the women with with housing, employment and other services. The program is also providing care packages with essentials like towels, body wash, face masks, deodorant and brushes.

Jones didn't know when inmates would begin being released or how many would walk out. The corrections department would not provide her that information, she said.

The law requires victims to be notified. Some have protested the plan, including one family devastated by a crime two decades ago.

Robert Valentine was shot repeatedly in front of his wife and 16-month-old son while the family opened presents on Christmas Day 1999, according to a letter from the Somerset County Prosecutor's Office objecting to the killer's early release.

Anthony Cignarella was convicted of aggravated manslaughter and two weapons charges, according to prison records. While he was originally scheduled to be freed next March, the law bumped his release up to Wednesday.

Valentine's mother received a form letter late last month notifying her of the release.

"I'm just more frustrated that we really weren't given the opportunity to fight because of the short notice," said Valentine's niece, Emma Lourenco. "We aren't the only family that this is happening to."

For others, the law came too late.

Rory Price, who was in prison for a weapons charge, died from the coronavirus just weeks before he was supposed to go home, according to his mother.

Early releases "can save other mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and countless loved ones the heartbreak I have been through from knowing my child's death could have been prevented," Bernice Ferguson said in a statement last month.

Inmates will continue to have sentences reduced as long as the public health emergency remains in effect. Murphy's office previously estimated another 1,000 people will be released early in the following weeks through January.