

# The Star-Ledger

## **Groups help newly freed prisoners get housing, medication as N.J. prepares to release more inmates**

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Nov. 13, 2020

A week after New Jersey released thousands of prisoners early, advocates expressed cautious optimism about how most of the newly freed inmates were adapting amid a pandemic.

Leaders and staff at seven organizations that help inmates reenter society told NJ Advance Media that getting people out of a system with the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation could save lives as cases rise statewide, but acknowledged challenges remained.

“Right now, it’s mostly been shouts of joy,” said Bonnie Kerness, program director for Prison Watch at the American Friends Service Committee. “The downside of release in general doesn’t hit until four or five months out, when jobs are hard to find, when mom or dad get impatient.”

New Jersey released more than 2,200 prisoners ahead of schedule the day after Election Day because of a first-in-the-nation law reducing sentences due to the threat of COVID-19 behind bars.

But close to 200 were quickly grabbed by federal immigration officers and other agencies, including one sex offender who now faces charges in Missouri.

Fifty-two juveniles were also released early from the juvenile system, spokeswoman Lisa Coryell wrote in an email. Each was taken home under an “individual community transition plan,” she said.

The newly freed faced both family reunions and quiet desperation, advocates said, but for some the most pressing issue is housing.

The reentry organization Volunteers of America Delaware Valley placed staff at Newark Penn, Trenton Transit and Pennsauken last week, according to President Dan Lombardo.

Of the approximately 75 who agreed to answer questions, around 45 said they were homeless and about 18 needed a ride somewhere, he said.

“How do we ensure, in the long term, these are people that have stable housing?” asked Alexander Shalom, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey. “That is the next battle.”

The corrections department did not immediately respond to questions about the status of the release program, but a spokeswoman previously said inmates received medication, grocery money and Narcan, a nasal spray used to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

Some people may run out of medications next week, according to the New Jersey Re-entry Corporation.

As a result, the nonprofit announced Thursday a partnership with Bergen New Bridge Medical Center to connect new releases struggling with substance abuse with doctors.

“Having an immediate connection to healthcare to maintain their medications and other conditions is crucial,” Deborah Visconi, president and CEO of the center, said in a statement.

Another issue has been ensuring former inmates have identification, which is needed to sign up for state services, advocates said.

About 319 of the releases were able to get ID’s through the state Motor Vehicle Commission, said Rev. Amos Caley, who works with the New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement, citing numbers he received from the governor’s office.

The rest were given identification cards from the prison system that expire in 30 days, Caley said.

The expiration date and the fact that the ID’s came from the corrections department could throw up roadblocks when someone tries to get a bank account or an apartment, he said.

The prisoner release program is ongoing.

About another 1,000 inmates nearing the end of their sentences will also be freed early in the following weeks through January, sources previously told NJ Advance Media.

In Camden County, Deborah Johnson said she is still waiting for her son.

“I continue to pray, that’s what’s been sustaining us,” she told NJ Advance Media.

Johnson’s son should be released in early December, according to prison records.

He’ll be able to work for the family’s dumpster rental business, Johnson said, and there’s a room ready and loved ones waiting for him.

Johnson said she hopes her mother, who has dementia, will still remember who he is.