



## **Press Release**

### **Government Policies Threaten to Exacerbate Risk of COVID-19 in Correctional Centres**

**March 20, 2020** (Ottawa, ON) – In response to the danger of COVID-19 spreading in Canada’s over-crowded prison systems, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) today shared a letter with Canada’s premiers and Attorney Generals, calling on them to prioritize the release of low-risk offenders to limit transmission of the virus. CAP further calls on Premiers and Attorney Generals to take steps to prevent risk of transmission in prisons for offenders who remain in custody.

“No one can maintain a safe distance when three to four prisoners are being held in a cell designed for two”, said National Vice-Chief Kim Beaudin.

Other groups also calling for action to protect prisoners from COVID-19 include CUPE Local 1949 in Saskatchewan, representing legal aid lawyers<sup>[1]</sup>, the Canadian Prison Law Association, the East Coast Prison Justice society in Nova Scotia<sup>[2]</sup>, in the pages of the Globe and Mail<sup>[3]</sup>, and by advocates for prisoners and public health across Canada<sup>[4]</sup>.

Courts have been closed, delaying hearings and trials, creating a higher risk for detainees who have not even been convicted of a crime yet. They will now have to wait longer before they can make an appeal for release, unless action is taken immediately.

Groups that should be prioritized for release include:

1. People held on remand who have not yet been convicted, who are charged with non-violent offenses.
2. Detainees who are eligible for parole and completing their sentences in the community, outside of over-crowded institutions.
3. Elderly detainees, in particular those with health conditions that would put them at high risk of complications or death should they be infected.
4. Young offenders who may be eligible to serve the remainder of their sentences in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://saskatoon.ctvnews.ca/sask-union-calls-for-release-of-low-risk-inmates-to-fight-covid-19-1.4860143>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thetelegram.com/news/local/province-considering-release-of-certain-inmates-in-light-of-covid-19-crisis-426531/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-during-a-pandemic-prisons-pose-a-special-risk-we-need-to-release-non/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-advocates-push-to-have-scores-of-inmates-released-amid-coronavirus/>

These steps would help to reduce over-crowding, lower the number of susceptible people in institutions, and reduce the number of high-risk infections that could result from an outbreak.

Further steps to reduce transmission in prisons, in line with Canada Public Health guidelines, would include:

1. Immediately reverse policies requiring prisoners to pay for their own soap and hygiene products and make those generally available.
2. Address isolation and lack of support by initiating a communication strategy, at no cost to offenders, with the families of all individuals presently in the justice system. Ensure that families are notified immediately if a prisoner has contracted the coronavirus.
3. Immediately reverse policies requiring prisoners to pay for their telecommunications, keeping prisoners connected with family and their community.
4. Ensure that proper medical supplies such and hazmat suits, surgical masks, hand sanitizers and cleaning supplies are made available to all institutions.
5. Create Coronavirus (COVID-19) kits consisting of basic essential supplies such as soap, medication and personal hygiene products.
6. Have health officials on hand to implement diagnostic testing for inmates and staff.

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*The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is the national voice representing the interests of Métis, status and non-status Indians, and Southern Inuit Indigenous People living off-reserve. Today, over 80% of Indigenous people live off-reserve.*