

# Joint Statement to Governor Brown

## Support for Ensuring Safety in Oregon Prisons

September 2020

As the state deals with confronting unprecedented wildfires, COVID, and systemic racism in our criminal justice system, we support the Governor in prioritizing desperately needed state resources toward these ends, **including taking bold action to safely reduce the prison population.**

We know all Oregonians are suffering right now and our hearts go out to everyone dealing with the struggles, stresses, and grief associated with the tumult of this year. As we look to support those currently in danger and those displaced by the recent wildfires, **we call on the Governor to take bold steps forward on her work to address COVID in prisons, to create a safer environment for adults in custody and correctional staff.**

In part due to the structural racism inherent in our criminal justice system and failure to invest in communities of color, Oregon's prison population is disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. There is also a significant number of adults in custody experiencing addiction and mental illness.

Since COVID reached Oregon in March, families of people in prison have had to cope with the fact that their loved ones do not have the ability to practice basic, life-saving COVID protocols like social distancing, proper mask use, or comprehensive testing of all individuals. Loved ones of adults in custody in particular have not had the ability to visit in person, with limited access to other methods of communication to speak with their family members and ensure their safety.

Following the recent evacuations of four Oregon prisons due to the wildfires, the conditions of adults in custody have garnered state, national, and international attention. See these articles: [New York Times](#), [the Guardian](#), [Oregonian](#).

*“Jennifer Black, a department of corrections (DOC) spokeswoman, said authorities at OSP have tried to keep different populations separate and reduce Covid risks, telling the Guardian: “We did the best we could ... but prison is just not designed to keep people 6ft apart and [the fires] make things more difficult.”*

*DOC was aware the evacuations could affect the spread of Covid-19, but the prisons were “focused on the immediate threat of wildfires”, she added.” - The Guardian*

The Department of Corrections does not have the legal authority to release without an order from the Governor, and this is just the beginning of fire season.

While Governor Brown has made small steps forward on her work to address COVID-19 and racial disparities in prison, these steps have not gone far enough.

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Washington and California have authorized early transitions, and as wildfires and COVID-19 grip our resource-strained state, we support the Governor's efforts to move forward with early transitions that will safely and significantly reduce the prison population, conserve critical resources, and save lives.



