

CITIZENS FOR PRISON REFORM NEWSLETTER
December 2020

More information can be obtained by searching for the bold headings on the internet. This will be the last issue of the newsletter, as Frank Dennis is retiring as editor in response to old age and failing mental acuity. If you have any questions about the contents of this issue, contact him at fdennis805@gmail.com.

Legislation, Michigan.

The following Pre-Trial Reform legislation will be up for consideration during the “lame duck” session in the next few weeks: House bills 5844, 5846-5852 and 5854-5857, and Senate bills 1045-1051. (See p. 4-5 below for details.) Readers are urged to write their representatives to urge passage of these bills. If action on the bills is not taken, they will have to be reintroduced in next year’s session.

SB 830-831 – Would provide protection for pregnant and post-partum women who are incarcerated from being restrained, and outline a procedure to determine if such a person needs to be restrained. SB 830 would also establish the right of an incarcerated woman to breastfeed and provided with sanitary supplies to express breast milk.

Books, Articles, Notes

Free Them All ! Why we must get people out of prisons, jails and detention centers in this pandemic – and work toward a future without incarceration. By Lewis Webb, Jr., and Kristin Kumpf. This spring, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), together with other organizations, filed a class action lawsuit demanding the release of all immigrant detainees in a for-profit immigration jail in New Jersey, where more than 18 immigrants had tested positive and one employee had died. These organizations and others have now joined in a call to “#Free Them All,” demanding the end to all forms of incarceration – and challenging the policies and practices that have led to mass incarceration and racial injustice in the US. This country now warehouses 2.3 million people, a majority of whom are black, brown and/or poor. Some 600,000 of them are in jails; most of them are awaiting trial and/or don’t have sufficient money to pay bail. The authors list a number of procedures that could reduce the numbers of prisoners, including: transformative and restorative justice; mediation and conflict resolution; meeting basic needs; immigration policies based on support, not punishment; and emergency response systems that emphasize de-escalation and mediation, rather than police action. (*Quaker Action*, Fall 2020)

MDOC Launches Pilot Program for Video Visitation. This program was initiated at the Parnall Correctional Facility and the Robert Cotton Correctional Facility in October, and was to be introduced at 5 other MDOC facilities in October and November. Information on its utilization is available on the web by searching for “mdoc video visitation.”

Free Offering – Counseling and Resource Guidance for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals. Hope Network and Nation Outside are partnering with the Michigan Public Health Institute to promote no-cost virtual services (phone or computer) to improve the mental health of returning citizens and provide a direct link with resources for housing, food, healthcare and other needs. To learn about the program and discuss a brief assessment of needs, individuals can schedule a free session by calling 855-571-0204.

Sheriff deputizes Safe&Just Michigan’s Rienstra. Troy Rienstra, Outreach Director of Safe and Just Michigan, has been deputized by Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson. Rienstra, a former prison inmate whose parole ended 4 years ago, will be doing outreach work on behalf of Nation Outside with persons held in detention in the county jail. (*S&F Michigan newsletter*, November 25, 2020)

Private prison companies freak out as Trump goes down in defeat. By Gary Ortiz, Mother Jones reports that prices of two of the nation’s largest private prison companies have fallen sharply since the election – the price of CoreCivic by 19 %, that of GEO by 14 %. This is attributed to President-elect Biden’s pledge to end government use of private prisons for the incarceration of undocumented immigrants. These companies contributed large amounts of cash to the 2020 election, much of it to Republican candidates, given President Trump’s support of the detention of unregistered immigrants. Private prisons currently hold about 70 % of those imprisoned by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service (ICE), and there is concern as to what would be done with these persons if such prisons were closed. The Biden campaign has strongly endorsed the use of case-management strategies, which were rescinded by Trump, instead of detention. This would include doctor visits, social services, and school for children, which are less costly and more effective than detaining families. (*Daily Kos*, November 9, 2020; see also “*Private Prisons Have Spent More on This Election Than Any Other in History*”, in *Mother Jones*, by Julie Lurie, October 11, 2020.)

Tears, Hugs, and Fresh Clothes: New Jersey Prisoners Rejoice at Release. By Tracey Tully, Nate Schweber, and Kevin Armstrong. As a result of legislation signed in October, 2258 inmates were released from prisons and halfway houses across New Jersey on November 4th – one of the largest-ever single-day reductions of any state’s prison population -- to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in these institutions. Only prisoners within a year of completing sentences for crimes other than murder and sexual assault were eligible for release up to 8 months early. During the coming months, another 1167 prisoners will be freed to reduce the chance of catching the virus in lockups where social distancing is almost impossible; this will result in about a 35 % reduction in the state’s prison population since the pandemic started. At least 52 virus-related inmate deaths have occurred in New Jersey’s prisons. Opponents of the legislation were concerned that releasing so many inmates at once might create a safety risk and lead to their committing new crimes as a result of inability to find jobs. Members of many social justice and re-entry organizations have volunteered to greet the returning prisoners and provide help with re-entry. (*The New York Times*, November 5, 2020)

Coronavirus Rages Through Prisons. The American prison system is a perfect breeding ground for the virus. During the week of November 17, 13,657 new

coronavirus infections were reported across state and federal prison systems – the highest weekly toll since tracking began last March. Coronavirus infections totaled over 45,470; more than 1450 prisoners, and 98 staff members, had died. Many of the facilities are old, overcrowded, and poorly lighted, and hygiene standards are difficult to maintain. Social distancing is essentially impossible, and high blood pressure, asthma and similar problems are common. The problem is more severe in rural areas, which often lack health care facilities, such as ventilators and I.C.U. beds, and jail populations turn over more rapidly, favoring spread of the virus in the community. Prison and jail populations declined in the first half of 2020 as a result of reductions in arrests and in jail and court bookings, but have since risen. Legislation has been introduced in some states to reduce prison population, including release of prisoners with a year or less left to serve, and reduction or elimination of bail. (*The New York Times* editorial, November 22, 2020)

Coming Home. Getting out of prison is just the start. The right guide can help you stay out. By Adam Gopnik. Housing opportunities for reentry are bewildering, and more than half of the prisoners currently being released in New York City are being dumped in shelters. David Rothenberg, a publicist, founded the Fortune Society, a non-profit organization that helps people returning from incarceration, in the 1960s when he became aware of the problems faced by these often homeless men. “The Castle” is now the main residential wing of the Fortune Society. It provides bedrooms for more than 80 residents and a room where meetings are held every Thursday night to “share announcements, discuss the week’s events, create new rules, and greet new arrivals.” But the real purpose is to conduct a group therapy session for 75 people. Until recently the leader of the group was Sam Rivera, a big man of native American and Puerto Rican heritage, with a shaved head and an earring in each ear. He was arrested on gun and drug charges in the ‘80s, and until recently was the unofficial leader of these mandatory, semi-sacred Thursday night gatherings. Some of his advice – “I can’t fix anyone. Nobody fixes you but you.” “The crime is not who you are. It’s what you did.” Workshops prepare clients for job interviews, with special attention to being straight as to what they have been doing for the last few (or more) years, and not just putting the best face on it. COVID-19 has forced the Castle to stop accepting new residents for the time being, and Sam has accepted a job as executive director of an organization that promotes health among drug addicts and sex workers, but he will be remembered by those whose lives he touched at the Castle. (*The New Yorker*, November 16, 2020)

Coming events

Friday, December 11, 2020. 10:00-11:30 a.m. Mitigating COVID-19 in Jail Settings Community of Practice. Webinar. The first in a monthly series that will feature facilitated discussions with stakeholders from across the country. Discussions of COVID-19 mitigation strategies in jail settings with key personnel, including recommended best practices for implementation of testing, contact tracing, and discharge planning for helping people in county jails. *Be Great*, Daniel Jones, Project Coordinator, Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration,

collaborative2014@gmail.com, 586-237-7785. For more information, go to:
behaviorhealthjustice.wayne.edu/coronavirus/toolkit.

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Citizens for Prison Reform (CPR). www.micpr.org; micpr.org@gmail.com. CPR, P.O. Box 80414, Lansing, MI 48908. Phone 269-339-0606. Lois (DeMott) Pullano, Executive Director. Tiffany Walker, Outreach and Communications Organizer, twalker@micpr.org. Mora Wilkevicz, President. A grassroots, family-run organization whose purpose is to educate, support and unify loved ones of prisoners within the state of Michigan. CPR works to inform legislators and create awareness as to the need for greater prison reforms; its meetings are free, secular and open to the public.

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The bipartisan smart justice bills will help end mass incarceration and racism in the criminal legal system.

Pretrial jail, suspended licenses, and mandatory minimum sentences dramatically and disproportionately impact Michigan’s minority and poorest residents accused of minor offenses, making it almost impossible for the accused to make a living, provide for their families, or to contribute to their communities.

By enacting these important reforms to our state’s criminal legal system, we can work to proactively solve problems, strengthening families, and building stronger communities.

We, the undersigned, strongly support the bipartisan pretrial task force bill package being considered by members of the Michigan Senate and state House of Representatives.

Smart Justice reform gives Lansing the chance to:

- Protect Michigander’s constitutional rights
- Ensure equal, more effective justice for residents with mental health issues
- Advance racial justice in the criminal legal system

- Equip law enforcement and judges with better options for quickly addressing minor and traffic offenses
- Strengthen communities

The bipartisan jail and pretrial reform package include:

House Bills 5844, 5846 – 5852, 5854 – 5857:

Eliminating driver’s license suspensions for offenses unrelated to unsafe driving, decriminalizing numerous misdemeanor traffic offenses to civil infractions, and eliminating mandatory minimum jail sentences for certain minor offenses.

Senate Bills 1046 – 1051:

Expands the ability of law enforcement to issue citations/appearance tickets in place of arrests, implements grace period for the first time a person misses a court date before they can be arrested, prioritizes alternatives to a jail sentence for various misdemeanors and low-level felonies, requires probation and parole conditions be tailored to the individual, adds behavioral health to statutory training standards for local corrections officers, and more.

We encourage lawmakers to approve these bills and urge Governor Gretchen Whitmer to sign them.