



PRESS RELEASE  
October 24, 2019

Contact: Piet van Lier  
[pvanlier@policymattersohio.org](mailto:pvanlier@policymattersohio.org)  
216.832.2102

## Advocates, family members, friends call on DeWine to save lives by shrinking prison population

People with loved ones who are incarcerated in Ohio prisons joined with six advocacy organizations and urged Governor DeWine to quickly release from Ohio's corrections facilities people who are at low risk for recidivism or high risk for contracting COVID-19. See a recording of the tele-press call [here](#). The conference recording is available on [Facebook](#). Other supplementary materials such as family photos and videos from people who are incarcerated can be found [here](#).

**Policy Matters Ohio Researcher Piet van Lier** moderated the call. He noted that as of Sunday, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections reports 67 people incarcerated in state prison facilities have tested positive for COVID-19 and 12 facilities are under full quarantine. Another 89 people are in isolation because they are suspected of having the virus.

David Watkins is a father of six and grandfather of 15. He is incarcerated at the Noble Correctional Institution. His daughter, **Kwanza Maxwell, of Columbus**, said she's worried about her father's health because he suffers from diabetes. His immune system is weakened from medication to prevent his body from rejecting a kidney transplant.

"He is currently at a facility that houses their inmates in an open dorm style room with bunks, and they eat on a bench with other inmates just an elbow's length away, which makes it impossible to practice social distancing," Maxwell said. "My father is a GOOD man, father, grandfather and husband who is tremendously loved, has a great support system and a successful business. His immediate release at this time is crucial to his survival and his right to spend the rest of his natural life here on earth. He was not sentenced to death and does not deserve to die while serving his very harsh sentence. That's why I am calling on Governor DeWine to do the right thing and send my father home."

**Kevin Ballou is a member of the Ohio Student Association** who lives in Cleveland. He served five years in the Marion Correctional Institution – one of Ohio's 12 prison facilities that are under quarantine. He said he's in regular communication with friends who are still in prison and worries about their safety.

"I am thinking about my friend Michael Powell," Ballou said. "Michael is a leader at Marion. He taught a class called 'Hope' to mentor the young people in the prison. He led an improv and theater class – which helps people deal with and release their emotions. I'm hearing from my friends at Marion's minimum-security facility that they are in total lock down. They can't go outside. They can't use the library. They haven't been to the commissary in over a month – so they don't have access to proper hygiene or food. They only get one hot meal a day. All the

people who are in this facility – like Michael – have demonstrated that they are ready to come home and contribute to society.”

**Rosie Pollack, of Frankfort**, said she fears for her husband who is incarcerated in Pickaway Correctional Institute. “I’m asking, please Governor Mike DeWine, release offenders with under a year to go, nowhere in their sentence was a horrible virus that could potentially kill our loved ones, or the staff,” she said. “I understand my husband committed a crime and he means nothing to you but he means the world to me and our children. I’m not asking for a free ride, put him on house arrest, strict probation or whatever, just let him come home. If he happens to get the virus god forbid give us the dignity of fighting it together.”

The concerned friends and family members were joined by advocates from the ACLU of Ohio, Policy Matters Ohio, Ohio Organizing Collaborative, the Juvenile Justice Coalition, Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) and Faith in Public Life.

“Policy Matters Ohio, the ACLU, the Ohio Organizing Collaborative and the Juvenile Justice Coalition have been working together for more than a year on sentencing reform and a number of other criminal justice issues,” van Lier said. “For a month now, our organizations have been raising the alarm about the potential for rapid spread of COVID-19 inside Ohio’s prisons, jails and detention facilities. With increasing urgency, we’ve been calling for the release of broad categories of people, with a focus on people at low risk for recidivism and people at high risk for contracting COVID-19, including older people and those with underlying health conditions.”

GARY????

**Policy Director at the Juvenile Justice Coalition Kenza Kamal** said Governor DeWine should order the release the hundreds of children being held by the Department of Youth Services.

“In Ohio, Black children are committed to juvenile facilities at five times the rate of white children -- that means that the kids who are staying locked up and being wrongly left behind in this moment are disproportionately Black children,” she said. “Kids in the juvenile system have higher rates of health issues than kids in general, including asthma and hypertension, which are two of the conditions that make you susceptible to the coronavirus. So while in previous circumstances this health disparity was worrying, right now it is deadly. What we need to do is get kids out of these conditions. Continuing to detain them runs the risk of facilities choosing to keep children in long-term isolation, which can become de facto solitary confinement – which is extremely harmful to children.”

**Carter Stewart, a former US Attorney spoke on behalf of LEAP.** “To me, this is a public safety issue. Law enforcement personnel who work at the state prisons are putting themselves, their families and their communities at risk,” he said. “Every day that they go to work and return home is another day they are rolling the dice as to whether they will spread the infection. The more staff that get sick, the less capable prison leadership becomes in terms of running and managing the prison. Governor DeWine has been a true leader on the virus in so many respects. I hope he will be one on the prison issue as well.”

**Blyth Barnow of Faith in Public Life**, appealed to Governor DeWine as a person of faith, to protect the lives of all Ohioans, no matter where they may be or what mistakes they may have made in their past. “In this holy and heavy season, we as people of faith call on Governor DeWine to protect life and practice love of neighbor by dramatically reducing the number of Ohioans who are incarcerated and freeing as many people as possible, whether they be in prison, jail, youth facilities, halfway houses, or immigration detention facilities,” she said. “Governor, the beloved children of God who are incarcerated in Ohio cannot save themselves alone. They need you. This decision is in your hands. As people of faith, we join in solidarity and call on you to meet the moral challenge of this catastrophic moment. There is no time for half measures. You must act boldly and now. It is the right thing to do, the just thing to do, and the faithful thing to do.”

###

*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute  
with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.*