

Senator Michael Dembrow
Senator James I. Manning Jr.
Senator Floyd Prozanski



Representative Janelle Bynum
Representative Tawna Sanchez

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Legislators Release Plan to Address COVID-19 in State Prisons

SALEM – Leaders of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees are releasing a multi-pronged “decompression” plan to address the problem of COVID-19 in the state’s prisons.

The plan calls for the immediate release of adults in custody (AICs) who are considered to be at particular risk of severe consequences from COVID-19. As well as the release of individuals who are just a few months away from the end of their sentence and who have approved housing available upon their release. The plan includes additional requirements that the Department of Corrections (DOC) must meet in order to guarantee the safety of AICs, Corrections staff and the community at large.

The proposed plan follows actions taken by the federal government and a number of Oregon counties to reduce their incarcerated populations in order to prevent the worst consequences of COVID-19 outbreaks.

Chairs and members of the Senate and House committees on Judiciary including Senator Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), Senator James I. Manning Jr. (D-Eugene), Senator Floyd Prozanski (D-Eugene), Representative Janelle Bynum (D-Happy Valley) and Representative Tawna Sanchez (D-Portland) presented the plan to Governor Brown and her public safety advisors on June 3rd. A portion of the proposal – potential commutation of the sentences of at-risk AICs – was agreed to and announced by the Governor in a communication to DOC on Friday, June 12th.

“We are very pleased with this as a first step,” said Representative Bynum, chair of the House Committee on Judiciary. “These are people with serious medical conditions, and the overly-congested conditions of our prisons can be a death sentence for them. The appropriate humanitarian response would be to release them as soon as possible.”

“I commend the Governor for taking this step,” said Senator Prozanski, chair of the Senate Committee on Judiciary. “But there’s more to be done. Due to COVID-19 and the upcoming budget shortfalls, we need to find intelligent ways to reduce the pressure on our prison system. DOC is doing the best that they can, but we can see from the Oregon State Penitentiary (where the largest COVID-19 outbreak among any workplace or congregate care setting in the state has occurred) that there are serious consequences when this disease takes off. We need a careful, long-range plan.”

“AICs have been reaching out to family and friends, asking to have their voices heard,” said Representative Sanchez, who previously served as chair of the House Committee on Judiciary. “There is fear for the most vulnerable incarcerated individuals as well as tension that is developing from what is perceived as a lack of concern for the health and well-being of those who are serving out their sentences.”

“We know that our prison system is over-represented by people of color, which is the sad legacy of mass incarceration,” said Senator Manning, who serves as co-chair of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety and previously served as a police officer and corrections officer. “These are human beings and they need to be treated with respect. If they’re within a few months of release, have served their time well, and there’s a place for them to go, we should be letting them transition to post-prison supervision.”

“This proposal was very carefully crafted by legislators,” said Senator Dembrow. “As the reopening process is underway across the state, it actually becomes more dangerous for those inside our facilities. There is significant risk of COVID-19 coming in to our state prisons from the outside, and that risk increases if we see a second wave of the disease in the fall. Careful, targeted reduction of the prison population, focusing on those who did not commit violent offenses, is a smart way to reduce the risk.”

The “Decompression Strategy for Oregon Corrections during the Pandemic” can be viewed [here](#). Legislators will hold press availability at 11:00am this morning via Zoom.

Members of the media should RSVP by emailing Amanda.Kraus@oregonlegislature.gov for information to join the Zoom briefing.

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