



MAINE YOUTH JUSTICE

March 19, 2020

Dear Governor Janet Mills,

On behalf of Maine Youth Justice, we are writing to share our concerns about the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on incarcerated youth.

As Maine undertakes steps to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus: closing schools, canceling events, and shifting to supporting children in their homes and communities, one group of young people is being left behind: the youth being held in custody throughout our state. In South Portland, Long Creek Youth Development Center, Maine's last youth prison, is holding approximately 50 youth, while county jails and adult correctional facilities are holding countless young people. The Maine Supreme Judicial Court is continuing to schedule and hear juvenile detention hearings at a time of crisis for our entire globe.

Research by health care experts shows that incarcerated populations are most at risk during a public health crisis. The Coalition for Juvenile Justice, the National Juvenile Justice Network, the Campaign for Youth Justice and other national and state juvenile justice leaders are calling on jurisdictions to take action to protect system-involved youth. COVID-19 spreads quickly in enclosed spaces such as cruise ships and nursing homes and it will spread just as quickly in detention centers, prisons, and jails. Contagious viruses such as COVID-19 spread much faster in detention centers and prisons as incarcerated youth are in close quarters and sometimes in unsanitary conditions. Behind bars, youth are not able to participate in proactive measures to keep themselves safe, such as social distancing, frequently washing hands, or staying in sanitized spaces. Infection control is challenging in these situations as incarcerated youth are often in large congregate and communal settings. Even if youth are in individual cells, ventilation is often inadequate. When traveling to and from court, hearings or legal appointments, it is harder to stop the spread of a virus while handcuffed or shackled.

While the Maine Department of Corrections has canceled visitation, we believe that this is not a time for youth to be separated from their support systems. This will only exacerbate mental health issues and further isolate youth. Further, Long Creek and correctional facilities are unlikely equipped to meet the medical needs of youth if a COVID-19 outbreak inside would occur. Youth will not have many options to stay away from other youth if they become ill and



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there are limited infirmary beds. If staff become ill, it will be difficult to provide care and support to youth and if lockdowns are utilized, that will only intensify virus infection rates.

In the Fall of 2017, there was a scabies spread in Long Creek. This outbreak led to solitary quarantines, pauses to educational and other programming, increased lockdowns, and extended health complications for a few infected youth. The scabies outbreak is an example of how the confined conditions at Long Creek present a significant health and safety risk to youth and staff. COVID-19 has the additional risks of airborne spread and fatal complications. We must act now to prevent the public health crisis that Long Creek presents for the approximately 50 detained youth, the Long Creek staff, their families, and our communities.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, we urge you to publicly share your emergency plan for addressing COVID-19 in the youth justice system, including the adoption of these measures to protect youth under the supervision of the youth justice system:

1. Immediately halting new admissions to Long Creek Youth Development Center and initiating the removal of youth from Long Creek, county jails, and prisons by:
 - a. Examining all pre- and post-adjudication release processes and mechanisms and begin employing these as quickly as possible;
 - b. Removing youth who have COVID-19 symptoms; chronic illnesses, such as asthma or diabetes; other serious illnesses; or are in need of medical care;
 - c. Eliminating any form of detention or incarceration for youth
2. While youth are awaiting release:
 - a. Provide written and verbal communications to youth on Covid-19, access to medical care, and community based supports;
 - b. Ensure continued access to education;
 - c. Ensure access to legal counsel through free confidential visits or teleconferencing;
 - d. Ensure access to family contacts and support networks;
 - e. Guarantee access to free unlimited phone calls.
3. Create transitional plans for youth released from custody to:
 - a. Ensure they have a place to live;
 - b. Meet their basic needs;
 - c. Receive immediate & adequate medical care;



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- d. Ensure immediate access to Mainecare.
4. For youth on probation:
 - a. Eliminate incarceration as an option for technical violations of probation;
 - b. Allow youth to travel and access medical care, stay isolated when necessary, and take care of themselves and their loved ones;
 - c. Eliminate requirements for in-person meetings with their probation officers;
 - d. Place a moratorium on all requirements to attend and pay for court and Probation-ordered programs, community service and labor.
 5. Expand community-based programs for youth by investing funds so that they are effectively supported in their communities in the long term as our economies recover from this crisis:
 - a. Close Long Creek and create a plan for reinvestment in community-based programs that would serve as an alternative to detention
 - b. Invest in community programs that provide basic resources for youth and their families
 - c. Build emergency housing for all houseless or housing insecure youth for self isolation

If you have additional questions or need more information, you can reach us by email at info@maineyouthjustice.org or (207) 504-5109.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Maine Youth Justice

Cc: Maine Department of Corrections
Maine Judicial Branch