

Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration  
% CADBI Rapid Response Committee  
P.O. Box 40764  
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Dear PA DOC Secretary John Wetzel,

Last March marks the one year anniversary of the implementation of COVID-19 lockdowns in prisons across Pennsylvania. In addition to the grave risk of contracting COVID-19 in settings that often have substandard medical care, incarcerated people in Pennsylvania and their families are facing a crisis of isolation and separation. As mental health professionals, spiritual leaders and Pennsylvanians, we demand that the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections is held accountable for the harm that it has done to incarcerated people and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the course of the pandemic, people in prison have frequently been confined to their cells for 23 or more hours a day. Many describe receiving cold, scant portions of their meals in-cell and having so little time out of cell that they must choose between a shower and a phone call to a loved one. Many report that they have not stepped outside or had access to the yard in over a year. The devastating impact of these measures cannot be overstated: incarcerated people are suffering from extreme isolation, loneliness and deprivation.

Incarcerated people experience disproportionately high incidences of mental health issues, which are easily exacerbated by the conditions of imprisonment (Turney, 2012). The implementation of public health measures aimed to stop the spread of COVID-19 has led to conditions more similar to solitary confinement than ever before. Extensive research has demonstrated that solitary confinement, even for short periods of time, leads to cognitive dysfunction, increased suicidality and hypersensitivity to stimuli (Haney, 2018; Hewson et al, 2020). Further, characteristics of solitary confinement — increased time inside a cell, reduced social interactions and decreased work and recreational activities — correlate with adverse mental health outcomes, including increased suicidality (Stephenson et al, 2020). Leading solitary confinement expert Craig Haney has deemed such isolating conditions to be psychological [torture](#).

These conditions not only harm incarcerated people themselves, but also their family members and loved ones who must live with this reality from afar. Family members and loved ones are often stripped of the opportunity to communicate with their incarcerated loved ones by faulty video visitation systems and limited phone time. Literature has shown that contact with the outside world through visits and other forms of connection leads to more successful reentry and reduced recidivism (Hewson et al, 2020). The experience of having a loved one incarcerated is a heavy burden alone, and the COVID-19 crisis has only increased this burden.

We therefore demand that you, Secretary Wetzel:

1. Take immediate action to decarcerate Pennsylvania prisons, in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19 and guarantee single cells for all incarcerated people who are over 50 *and/or* medically vulnerable, with a long-term goal of single cells for *all* incarcerated people. This includes:
  - a. Publicly call for Governor Wolf to immediately grant reprieve to all individuals who are eligible under PA's [reprieve program](#);
  - b. Ensure parole eligibility for everyone at their minimum date from this moment forward; for anyone who is already incarcerated past their minimum date, consider these people for immediate release; *and*
  - c. Expedite the commutation process by lifting the requirement that all applicants interview with Secretary Wetzel.
2. Take immediate action to improve mental health conditions for incarcerated people, including:
  - a. Personal protective equipment (including medical-grade masks), and regular PCR COVID-19 testing for all incarcerated people, recognizing that in a pandemic access to basic protective equipment is a prerequisite to psychological wellness;
  - b. Guaranteed access to substantial time outdoors *every* day for all incarcerated people, effective immediately;

- c. Daily access to phone calls and virtual visits for all incarcerated people, effective immediately. Issued tablets for all incarcerated individuals and allow individuals unlimited access to their tablets in their cells; *and*
  - d. Access to a minimum of one private consult per week with a licensed mental health professional for all incarcerated people.
3. Issue a statement acknowledging and taking full responsibility for the harm that has been committed by the DOC during the pandemic, and issue a robust plan for supporting the mental health of incarcerated people who are dealing with the impact of over a year of isolation and deprivation.

With urgency,

Elyse Wechterman, **Executive Director of Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association**

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## References

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