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One Year After First Taking Action on COVID-19, Texas Criminal Justice Reform Advocates Decry Continuing Dangers for Incarcerated People

AUSTIN, TX — Exactly one year after the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) first asked Governor Greg Abbott to protect incarcerated people and their communities from the urgent threat of COVID-19, the organization is remembering the lives lost to the virus and continuing to push for action. On March 16, 2020, TCJC and a large group of advocates and system-impacted people published a [letter to Governor Abbott](#) and the state’s criminal justice agencies with clear directives to mitigate the potential disaster of a deadly and fast-spreading virus in youth and adult corrections facilities.

The advocates wrote, “We fear the inevitable spread of the virus makes those who are incarcerated particularly vulnerable to the disease, and leaves facilities as a whole susceptible to a devastating outbreak... The virus will be especially dangerous for the rapidly growing aging population, those with disabilities, and those with chronic health issues... When this highly transmissible virus passes through facilities, confined individuals are likely to contract the virus from staff who enter and exit facilities daily—and staff who have not yet been infected will be at greater risk of becoming ill.”

Sadly, the nightmare scenario the advocates presented last March has come to pass. According to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) [COVID-19 dashboard](#), over 250 people incarcerated in TDCJ have died from causes related to COVID-19, and over 34,200 have been infected. Among staff, 43 have died and over 11,200 have been infected. In county jails across the state, the situation is similarly dire; the Harris County (Houston) jail, the largest in Texas, is “[dangerously overcrowded in the pandemic](#).” The extreme winter weather that gripped the state last month also [exacerbated existing issues](#), leading to extremely unhealthy conditions of confinement.

“Every one of these deaths represents the loss of a unique individual, the suffering of a Texas family, and an unknowable cost to the wider community,” said Doug Smith, TCJC Senior Policy Analyst. “That devastation is only increased by the knowledge that safe, realistic mitigation strategies were ignored by leadership in favor of the status quo.”

Texas’ juvenile justice system has not been immune from the impacts of COVID-19, with 325 youth in secure facilities testing positive, as well as 466 staff members, and county detention centers lacking the localized resources and supports to release kids as quickly and safely as necessary.

Over the past year, TCJC and other organizations and advocates have continuously proposed a variety of achievable strategies, including shrinking incarcerated populations to allow for social distancing, sending those with COVID-19 symptoms to health care facilities instead of detention centers, and relying on community-based supervision strategies. As vaccine rollout began, TCJC also advocated for incarcerated people to be prioritized for the vaccine, particularly those within the 1B eligibility group.

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“Although it feels like we’re starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, the sad reality is that the effects of this pandemic will linger for years to come,” said Alycia Castillo, TCJC Policy Analyst. “The trauma of losing loved ones or struggling with an intense illness behind bars will certainly last, and the losses will reverberate in communities across the state. The need for our leadership to take action remains as urgent as ever, and decarceration could still save lives.”

Some of TCJC’s earliest actions in response to the pandemic are listed below; for the full list, please visit www.TexasCJC.org/covid-19.

- **Letter to the Governor with directives for state and county officials:** As the first cases began to emerge in Texas, TCJC joined a large group of advocates and allies in sending a set of urgent directives to Governor Greg Abbott. The [letter](#), first published on March 16, 2020, includes recommendations for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, law enforcement, county-level officials, and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department.
- **Change.org petition:** TCJC accompanied the letter with a [petition](#), which has garnered over 8,000 signatures from community members who agree that we must act to protect incarcerated and system-impacted Texans from the threat of COVID-19.
- **Response to the Governor’s executive order on bail:** After Governor Abbott issued an executive order blocking the release of thousands of legally innocent pretrial detainees on March 29, 2020, TCJC released an additional [statement](#) urging the Governor to rescind the order and direct county officials to reduce their jail populations as safely and as quickly as possible.
- **Reasonable parole- and reentry-related strategies:** On April 6, 2020, TCJC joined with a group of justice advocates in publishing an urgent [appeal](#) to accelerate reductions in the Texas prison population.

TCJC is also working alongside various partners to support legislative proposals during Texas’ 87th Legislative Session that address conditions of confinement and improve opportunities for release. These include:

- [HB 1598](#) (Jarvis Johnson), *Relating to the creation of the office of independent oversight ombudsman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.*
- [HB 2331](#) (Cortez), *Relating to procedures governing declared disasters for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the Board of Pardons and Paroles.*
- [HB 2793](#) (Jarvis Johnson), *Relating to parole determinations and individual treatment plans for inmates.*
- [HB 4371](#) (Allen), *Relating to juvenile justice reform, including the age of a child at which a juvenile court may exercise jurisdiction over the child and the age of criminal responsibility.*

Additional policies supported by TCJC can be found on our [“Spend Your Values” campaign page](#), as well as in our discrete “policy area” webpages.

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The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) advances solutions and builds coalitions to end mass incarceration and build safer Texas communities. To learn more about TCJC, visit www.TexasCJC.org.