



Press Release: January 22, 2021

Contact: Brandon Walthour, brandon@floridarrc.org, (407) 233-3614

Brittany Bell Surratt, brittany@spitfirestrategies.com, (202) 468-2700

Florida Rights Restoration Coalition urges Gov. DeSantis to prioritize access to vaccines within the criminal justice system

FRRC Executive Director, member of National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, calls to act on key recommendations

In response to President Biden's new policy increasing access to COVID-19 vaccines, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRC) is urging Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to prioritize vaccinations among those incarcerated by and working within the state's criminal justice system, namely the 90,000 incarcerated people, 24,000 staff members, and their families and local communities. FRRC is pushing this action because it is in the interest of both public safety and public health.

On January 22, 2021, FRRC wrote a letter to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, calling on his administration to prioritize prisons and jails as the state expands access to COVID-19 vaccines. Florida has the third-largest state prison system in the country, and the Department of Corrections is the largest state agency in Florida. FRRC calls for innovative action to ensure Florida's most vulnerable communities' health and safety. The state of Florida is expected to receive an additional [266,100](#) vaccine doses within the next week.

Correctional facilities continue to be hotspots for COVID-19 exposure and transmission. Hundreds of health and criminal justice experts have called on all levels of government across the nation to prioritize jails and prisons in vaccine distribution.

In response, the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice was convened. Co-chaired by former US Attorney Generals Alberto Gonzales and Loretta Lynch, a bipartisan network of experts from throughout the country worked tirelessly to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the justice system, develop strategies to limit outbreaks, and produce a priority agenda of systemic policy changes to better balance public health and public safety. Florida's presence was represented by the Honorable State Attorney of the Fourth Judicial Circuit, Melissa Nelson, and FRRC's Executive Director Desmond Meade.

The commission's final report echoes these concerns across states, outlining key recommendations to help leaders overcome this pandemic and change the system for the better. In the report, the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice outlined five key recommendations to help leaders overcome the pandemic and change the criminal legal system for the better. One of those recommendations was specifically to "prioritize those



incarcerated by and working within the criminal justice system for pandemic response, including providing early access to vaccines and personal protective equipment.”

“This is about public safety and public health,” said FRRC Executive Director Desmond Meade. “It is a defining moment for our state to demonstrate how it prioritizes our most vulnerable communities,” Meade continued. “Just as the state has implemented a national model in vaccinating seniors, we are calling for a bold initiative to build on the strategy and progress of people in prisons and jails who are also at high risk for COVID.”

While under 5 percent of the general population of Florida has experienced a confirmed case of the virus, roughly [18 percent](#) of the population in the state’s prisons have. In addition, people who are incarcerated are also [more likely to experience](#) medical conditions that put them at [increased risk](#) of severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19. As of January 20, [205](#) of Florida’s roughly [88,000](#) incarcerated individuals had suffered from COVID-19-related deaths, representing a mortality rate of 233 per 100,000. In other words, people who are incarcerated in Florida’s prisons are slightly more likely to die from COVID-19 than are people ages 65 to 74.

Since the onset of the COVID pandemic, FRRC has worked to connect families and their loved ones who are incarcerated, distribute much-needed PPE to jails and prisons, and work to help individuals get their fines and fees paid and move forward with their lives. Prioritizing people in prisons and jails for vaccine distribution is the next step in our and the state’s efforts to end the virus and protect Florida’s communities.

About The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition

FRRC is a grassroots, membership organization run by Returning Citizens (Formerly Convicted Persons) who are dedicated to ending the disenfranchisement and discrimination against people with convictions and creating a more comprehensive and humane reentry system that will enhance successful reentry, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety. For more information, [visit https://floridarrc.com/](https://floridarrc.com/).

For further information, contact brittany@spitfirestrategies.com, press@Floridarrc.org, or Brandon Walthour at (407) 233-3614.

###