



January 22, 2021

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor of the State of Florida
PL The Capitol
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis,

I am writing to you as your administration continues its efforts to combat COVID-19 across our state. On behalf of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRC), millions of Florida's returning citizens, and their loved ones, I write to specifically urge you to prioritize prisons and jails as our state expands access to COVID-19 vaccines.

Florida has the third-largest state prison system in the country, and our [Department of Corrections](#) (FDC) is the largest state agency in Florida. The way our state chooses to address COVID-19 within the criminal legal system has implications for not only nearly 90,000 incarcerated individuals and 24,000 staff members, but also their families and local communities. Over [80 percent](#) of FDC staff members are correctional officers or probation officers, many with direct contact with individuals who are or have been incarcerated. For these reasons, we support FDC Director Mark Inch's request to prioritize state prisons in the vaccine distribution process. Our hope is that the FDC can follow the example of the [Federal Bureau of Prisons](#) and the [recommendations](#) of public health experts in prioritizing prisons and jails for vaccine distribution. Taking this step is clearly in the best interest of [public health](#).

We know that your administration and the CDC continue to work on guidance for determining who should be prioritized for vaccination. In developing its recommendations for the first phase of vaccination, the CDC [considered](#) how healthcare and long-term care facilities can be "high-risk locations for SARS-CoV-2 exposure and transmission," and how people in long-term care facilities, "because of their age, high rates of underlying medical conditions, and congregate living situation, are at high risk for infection and severe illness from COVID-19." The CDC has also pointed to high risks of COVID-19 cases and associated deaths in recommending the prioritization of specific populations, such as those over age 75, in [subsequent phases](#) of vaccination. Additionally, Florida has developed its own guidance, with [your executive action](#) prioritizing long-term care facility residents and staff, persons ages 65 and older, and healthcare personnel with direct patient contact in the state's first phase of vaccination.

Yet there is another community in Florida that faces similar risks and needs in relation to COVID-19 as the above populations: the people housed in our state's prisons and jails.

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.



Just as healthcare and long-term care facilities are “high-risk locations” for COVID-19 exposure and transmission, prisons carry with them much higher rates of COVID-19 cases. In fact, prisons represent congregate living situations even more crowded than nursing homes, making social distancing in them [nearly impossible](#). As a result, correctional facilities continue to be hotspots for COVID-19 exposure and transmission. 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. And things are getting worse. Just last week, [new cases](#) in Florida’s prisons reached their highest level since testing began in the spring, far outstripping previous peaks in April and August.

Furthermore, as in long-term care facilities, this high risk of exposure in prisons is particularly harmful to the people housed in prisons due to their age and likelihood of having an underlying medical condition. People who are incarcerated are [more likely to experience](#) medical conditions that put them at [increased risk](#) of severe illness from the virus that causes COVID-19. In addition, between 2009 and 2019, the number of Floridians incarcerated in the state’s prisons who were over age 50 grew by [77 percent](#), despite a decrease in the overall prison population. Over [27 percent](#) of the prison population was at least 50 years old as of June 2019, more than in any other state. As your administration continues to [put seniors first](#), we cannot forget the seniors living under the care of our state’s corrections system.

Lastly, as a result of the high risk of COVID-19 exposure in prisons and the increased vulnerability of the people housed in these facilities, it is no surprise that incarcerated individuals face particularly high mortality rates from the virus—rates not so different from the mortality rates of populations already prioritized for vaccination. As of January 13, 2021, individuals ages 75 to 84 had a cumulative mortality rate of [568](#) per 100,000, and individuals ages 65 to 74 had a mortality rate of [223](#) per 100,000. By comparison, 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. As you remain committed to focusing vaccination on those who are “[most at-risk to this virus](#),” we urge you to consider the high risks faced by people in prisons.

In the nationwide effort to combat COVID-19, Florida has achieved [a number of firsts](#). Ours was the first state to begin offering vaccines both to staff and residents of Florida’s long-term care facilities and to EMTs and paramedics. Your administration has also gone [above and beyond](#) in vaccinating broader segments of the population, representing the first state in the nation to actively vaccinate individuals ages 65 and older.

As our state receives an additional [266,100 doses next week](#) and prepares to distribute the vaccine to wider populations, we believe you have the opportunity to be bold and build on this strategy and progress. Just as your office has implemented [a national model in vaccinating](#)

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[seniors](#), you can further demonstrate leadership by ensuring access to vaccination for another vulnerable segment of our population: people who are incarcerated.

This past year I was honored to be a part of the [National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice](#), co-chaired by former Attorneys General Alberto Gonzales and Loretta Lynch. This Commission included leaders from around the country including Melissa Nelson, the State Attorney for our own Fourth Judicial Circuit. Its mission was to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the justice system, develop strategies to limit outbreaks, and produce a priority agenda of policy changes to better balance public health and public safety. One of the key recommendations in the Commission's [final report](#) calls on each level of government 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.”

In your administration's ongoing efforts to end the coronavirus, we encourage you to lead the way by prioritizing Florida's community of people living and working in our prisons and jails in vaccine distribution.

Sincerely,

Desmond Meade

Executive Director, Florida Rights Restoration Coalition

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