

Amistad Law Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://amistadlaw.org/fighting-freethevulnerable-during-pandemic>

Campaign and Advocacy

With the crisis of a global pandemic gripping all our lives, incarcerated people are squeezed even tighter. Prisons are high-risk, poorly ventilated environments where social distancing is impossible. The state is demonstrating a lack of care of incarcerated people and this must be monitored and challenged as this pandemic continues. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Amistad Law Project has tracked the spread of the virus through the state prison system. We've advocated for a dramatic reduction of the prison population to reduce the harm of the virus to incarcerated people and prison staff. We initially demanded that the population of PA state prisons must be reduced so incarcerated people can single cell and social distancing is more possible. We continue to demand that aging and medically compromised people in prison have a pathway home.

We've taken many actions to advance decarceration as a public health measure. Along with the ACLU of PA and Abolitionist Law Center, we [wrote letters to the Governor](#) detailing ways to reduce the prison population. We organized public health experts and [faith leaders](#) to speak out. [We authored op-eds and spoke out in the media](#). We co-authored [a report on the pandemic in PA prisons](#) with Rachel Lopez, Director of the Andy and Gwen Stern Community Lawyering Clinic and Associate Professor of Law at the Thomas R. Kline School of Law at Drexel University. Through our [Free Them to Heal Us](#) network, we organized community members for creative online mobilizations to pressure decision makers.

In response to a powerful wave of advocacy, Governor Wolf established an unprecedented reprieve program to suspend people's sentences. Sadly, the criteria for who was eligible for reprieve was far too limited and the Governor released only a small number of people. Simultaneously, we saw a reduction of the prison population by over 6,600 people. Some of this reduction is due to the courts being mostly shut down during the pandemic and not feeding the system at the same rate and some is due to increased parole releases. While we celebrate these victories, they are not nearly enough. The Department of Corrections estimates that they would need to release at least 12,000 people to mitigate the harm of COVID-19. At a hearing in January of 2021, Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel pegged the number even higher at 15,000.

We've continued the fight to bring people home and continue to advocate for an expansion of the reprieve program. In collaboration with two dedicated data scientists with the Annenberg School for Communication, we released our own [dashboard](#) to track the spread of COVID-19 in PA prisons. We dedicated the [first episode of our podcast](#) to analyzing the pandemic in PAs prisons. We are working on a report which will analyze the DOCs response to COVID-19 and its inability to truly care for the people it incarcerates. We will continue to make the case for further decarceral reforms during the pandemic and beyond. The problem we face is, in part, a problem of scale. There are too many people in prison for the Department of Corrections to treat them humanely. COVID-19 has tragically illustrated this point.

A sing on top of a car reads 'Free Our People' at a car caravan protest

"COVID has shown us that we are all deeply interconnected. We cant divide our health and well-being from that of others. When my clinic decided to write our report Pandemic in PA Prisons documenting the risk that COVID-19 behind bars posed for all of us, we knew that Amistad Law Project was the ideal co-collaborator and author for the report. They were doing the hard work of organizing and advocating to bring people home from prison at a critical moment, thereby filling a critical space in the legal community. Their vision and inspiring work is rooted in a profound understanding that we can't underestimate the power of our collective voices and that social change is only possible when we work together and amplify the voices of those communities most affected by mass incarceration." - Rachel Lopez, Director of the Andy and Gwen Stern Community

