**Keep COVID-19 Out of Ohio Jails, Prisons, and Courts**

We write out of deep concern for the health of our family members, friends, and clients currently incarcerated in Ohio’s prisons and jails. They include people in criminal and “civil” immigration custody. [**Medical doctors**](https://www.businessinsider.com/experts-keeping-prisons-free-of-coronavirus-will-be-a-challenge-2020-3) **have been warning that the jail setting is a veritable Petri dish for infectious disease; proactive, sweeping measures are needed to keep COVID-19 out of our jails and slow its destructive path.**

Many people living together in close quarters, often in dirty conditions without decent medical care, is a recipe for rapidly spreading COVID-19. Outbreaks in prisons would be extremely difficult for our already overtaxed medical community and government agencies to handle.

**We need to learn from the jail outbreaks of COVID-19 in** [**China**](https://www.businessinsider.com/500-coronavirus-cases-reported-in-jails-in-china-2020-2) **and** [**Iran**](https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/04/middleeast/iran-coronavirus-response-intl/index.html)**, and release as many incarcerated people as possible to avoid them here.** Already, staff members at jails in Delco, PA and Elizabeth, NJ have tested positive for the virus, and it’s only a matter of time before the disease spreads inside Ohio’s jails and prisons.

The following steps must be taken immediately to ensure the health and safety of all Ohioans, including those who are incarcerated, and further contain this deadly disease:

* Immediately and dramatically reduce the number of people in Ohio jails and prisons;
* Suspend deportations, immigration arrests, and in-person ICE and USCIS appointments;
* Close the Cleveland Immigration Court; and
* Ensure inmates have access to free soap, hand sanitizer, health care, and phone and video calls.

These measures would protect our loved ones and jail and court employees, while reducing the risk of massive outbreaks of COVID-19 that would further tax our medical and government resources. For more information, read [this](#_dcmog1ra320y) brief document.

Respectfully,

Add your name and/or organization here: <http://bit.ly/OHIACOVIDSign>

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## **Background: Keep COVID-19 Out of Ohio Jails and Prisons**

**Immediately and dramatically reduce the number of people in Ohio jails and prisons.**

**Every agency that incarcerates people in Ohio should review its full list of cases, identify those who are already eligible for release, and allow them to go home immediately.** This includes, but is not limited to, county and city governments and federal immigration agencies.Ohio and federal courts should also determine which inmates can be effectively released in the near future, and take steps to pave the way toward their release, as is starting to happen in [Cuyahoga County](https://fox8.com/news/coronavirus/cuyahoga-county-jail-releasing-some-inmates-early-to-help-minimize-potential-coronavirus-outbreak/) and other places.

**Courts and arresting agencies should not add to the incarcerated population.** Incarceration should be considered a last resort at every point in a criminal or immigration case. In immigration court, judges should offer alternatives to detention as a default, rather than high bonds, to avoid expanding the incarcerated population.

**Suspend deportations, immigration arrests, and in-person ICE and USCIS appointments.**

Reducing travel and social contact are primary ways to “flatten the curve” of this global pandemic. Deportations are travel and should be suspended immediately. ICE and Border Patrol arrests involve social contact and add to the jail population, which needs to be reduced, rather than expanded.

In-person ICE and USCIS appointments also violate recommendations for social distancing. Some of these appointments can be effectively handled through phone or digital means. Others should be rescheduled after the pandemic is over.

**Close the Cleveland Immigration Court.**

**The federal Executive Office for Immigration Reform (EOIR)’s Immigration Court in Cleveland should suspend operations, effective immediately, except for detained bond hearings.**

The National Association of Immigration Judges (NAIJ); American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 511 (Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Professionals Union); and American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) issued a [joint statement](https://www.naij-usa.org/images/uploads/newsroom/2020.03.15.00.pdf) making this very demand: “Failing to take this action now will exacerbate a once in a century public health crisis.”

On March 15, EOIR postponed all in-person master calendar hearings between March 16 and April 10. But individual hearings are still going forward, continuing to put the public and court staff at risk. The Seattle Immigration Court has [already closed](https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/13/immigration-hearings-delayed-1-court-shut-over-covid-19/); Cleveland and others should follow. Bond hearings conducted remotely should continue until all immigrants are released.

**Ensure inmates have access to free soap, hand sanitizer, and phone and video calls.**

It goes without saying that soap and disinfectants should be in abundance at our jails and prisons at all times, including during a pandemic. Sadly, this is not the case. In some jails, bathroom soap dispensers are always empty. Inmates are forced to purchase their own soap, at exorbitant prices. Health care should also be a given, but costs and corners are cut all the time.

Also, Ohio is no longer allowing inmates to receive visits from loved ones as a precautionary measure. Contact with loved ones is vital to mental health, and people in detention also have a constitutional right to speak with their lawyers.

Hygiene supplies, health care, video and phone calls must be made free to inmates during the duration of this outbreak. Price-gouging commissary and phone and video services should not be allowed to take advantage of struggling families ever, especially during this national emergency.