

Right now, thousands of women and girls in Florida are being put at risk of illness and even death by COVID-19. They are in Florida prisons and jails, where a combination of unhygienic conditions, inadequate medical care, and vulnerable people threatens the lives of incarcerated women and their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the US, and the CDC has issued urgent guidelines to slow its spread, including hand-washing, disinfecting surfaces, and avoiding close contact between people. These seemingly simple precautions are impossible in Florida prisons, where incarcerated people are forced into close proximity without access to cleaning supplies, sufficient medical care, or even basic information about the virus.

Take for example Lowell Correctional Institution. Lowell is already infamous for violent abuse, filthy conditions (including rats and roaches), and woefully inadequate healthcare. *The Miami Herald* has already conducted an investigative series on abuse at Lowell prison, and reports continue to come out regarding the terrible conditions. Many of the women incarcerated there fit government “high risk” criteria for COVID-19, including those in the “hospice” and pregnancy dorm. Lowell can’t (or won’t) provide medical care for these women at the best of times, and the middle of a pandemic is the polar opposite. This pandemic will flourish in places like Lowell, with tragic results.

The Florida Department of Corrections claims it is taking precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately, many of these measures range from inadequate to cruel. Visits are banned until April 5, depriving people of access to their loved ones and support systems. The pain of denying people their families brings no benefit as staff freely enter and leave prisons, carrying the virus back and forth with them. Guidelines also suspend non critical transfers, a precaution that would make sense, if it were being implemented.

But it isn’t. Inside sources report that two women were transferred from Homestead Correctional Institution to Lowell on March 18 and subsequently isolated, after the guidelines were released. Both Lowell and the Office of Institutions in Tallahassee have denied the transfer took place.

The FDC has claimed there are no cases of COVID-19 in any of their prisons. Even if this were true, the state of Florida has over 400 confirmed cases of the virus. Again, staff are entering and leaving prisons with no quarantine provisions. The virus is highly contagious and potentially deadly to vulnerable populations, including the elderly and immunocompromised. Without proper steps, Florida is essentially circumventing the justice system and sentencing women to death.

The FDC has stopped intake, which is a step in the right direction, but it does nothing for those already in prisons. Prisons are unsanitary, overcrowded, and pose a risk to the health of not only incarcerated people, but the entire state. More steps need to be taken, in particular the compassionate release of vulnerable people, including:

- pregnant women
- women housed in hospice
- women over 60
- women incarcerated with less than one year remaining in their sentence

Releasing these women will reduce crowding, reduce strain on medical facilities, and save lives, without endangering public safety. Some counties in Florida are already doing the right thing. Hillsborough and Lake Counties have released hundreds of people to help prevent the spreading of this virus. Ohio and California have both instituted state-wide compassionate release programs. Florida must follow suit.

COVID-19 is not slowing down, and it will spread like wildfire throughout our jails and prisons. These women are our neighbors, friends, part of our families and we have a duty to do right by them. This pandemic should remind us of the ways caring for the most vulnerable protects the entire community.