CRIMINAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES DEMAND CHANGES TO VACCINATION PROCESS IN NEW YORK STATE PRISONS

In a letter to Governor Cuomo, the “COVID Justice Coalition” also calls for transparency on vaccination data

(NEW YORK, NY – MAY 26, 2021) In a letter to Governor Andrew M. Cuomo criminal and social justice advocates called upon the government to address major flaws in the COVID vaccination process in New York State prisons.

Specifically, the letter authored by the newly formed COVID Justice Coalition and signed by more than nearly 100 advocates, demanded that the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS):

• use trusted, outside groups to administer the vaccine inside prisons and conduct vaccine education for both incarcerated individuals and their families
• require transparency in DOCCS vaccination reporting

The COVID Justice Coalition (CJC), was founded in August 2020 by the David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy – the advocacy and policy arm of The Fortune Society. This coalition of advocacy groups was formed to provide resources and guidance on the COVID-related needs of justice-involved individuals to local government agencies, advocacy groups, and other key stakeholders.

In the letter, the CJC wrote, “While we are relieved that the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) is finally providing the COVID-19 vaccine to all incarcerated New Yorkers, we remain concerned about (1) the problems with medical staff administering the vaccine and the insufficiency of vaccine education; and (2) the lack of transparency throughout the process.”

As of April 30, DOCCS reported that only 25% of the total population of incarcerated people had been vaccinated, with a total of 45% stating that they would accept the vaccine. However, that number is not nearly high enough for a congregate setting, and lags way behind the rates of many other states, some of whom have even managed to vaccinate their incarcerated population at higher rates than the population as a whole. The CJC letter cited a national survey conducted by the Marshall Project, a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization, showing that people in prison expressed a deep distrust of prison medical staff and wariness about any care provided by medical staff. New York State is clearly still in that realm.

“Experience and research have shown that incarcerated people distrust the correctional health system and the care it provides,” the CJC wrote. “They have seen or have experienced substandard medical care and had their medical concerns ignored. There have also been high rates of vaccine refusal by correctional staff, who may be spreading their own fears to
incarcerated individuals. In New York State, it is clear that the current education and vaccine efforts have not be enough."

The CJC recommended to the Governor that COVID-19 vaccines, as well as education about COVID and the vaccine, be administered by an outside organization, rather than DOCCS and its medical personnel.

In addition, the CJC asked the State to provide information and education to the family members of incarcerated individuals about the vaccine, as well as how to talk to their family members about the need to vaccinate oneself, particularly in a congregate setting. “For many incarcerated people,” the CJC wrote, “their family is their most trusted source of information.

The CJC letter further stated, “DOCCS also needs to make its current vaccination rates publicly available.”

In a recent report by the UCLA Law School about COVID-19 data transparency, COVID-19 Behind Bars Data Project, DOCCS received a grade of “F.” While DOCCS reports the number of COVID diagnoses and number of deaths on its website, it does not publish the number of incarcerated people who have received the vaccine or who have been offered the vaccine but refused.

The CJC believes this data must be broken down by facility, age, and race/ethnicity of the individual, and posted on the DOCCS website at least weekly.

“Being transparent is an important part of building public trust in both the vaccine process and DOCCS’ overall plans,” the CJC wrote.

The letter concludes, “It is critically important to the health of incarcerated people, and for the health of our communities, for the State to act without delay to improve vaccine confidence and acceptance among this group of disproportionately affected New Yorkers.”

Click here to read a copy of the CJC letter.

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