

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### Public Health Leaders Call for Swift Decarceration in Face of Pandemic

Boston, MA – Today, public health leaders called for passage of legislation to safely decarcerate as many people as possible to limit the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and interrupt the staggering racial inequities evident in state data on COVID-19 cases.

In testimony to the legislature’s Joint Committee on Judiciary, the Task Force on Coronavirus & Equity asked the committee to take swift action in support of House Bill 4562, sponsored by Representative Lindsay Sabodosa.

“The people in prisons and jails are important members of our communities, they are our husbands, wives, fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, and neighbors,” wrote **Sandro Galea, Cheryl Barlett, and Carlene Pavlos** on behalf of the Task Force. “Simply because they have been arrested or convicted for a crime does not justify sentencing them to sickness and potentially death from COVID-19.”

The Task Force noted that:

- Infections among people detained in prisons and jails (as well as correctional staff) is increasing at an astounding rate - a shocking increase of 27 times in just the last three weeks.
- People who are incarcerated have higher rates of chronic and infectious illnesses and disabilities. Additionally, there is a large proportion of people over the age of 50. All these factors put people who are incarcerated at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and of having worse outcomes, including death.
- People of color are disproportionately incarcerated, due to decades of systemic racism in policing and criminal justice systems. Unsafe conditions in prisons and jails are exacerbating already unacceptable racial inequities in the impact of this pandemic.
- At least nine Governors and the federal Department of Justice have issued orders to reduce the number of people in their jurisdictions. For example, in California, the Governor has set up a system to secure 15,000 hotel rooms to shelter people who are homeless and exiting prisons and jails, with aid from FEMA.

The bill provides that several categories of people who are incarcerated and who do not pose any immediate physical threat to the community be released, with a focus on those who are at increased risk for COVID-19, such as:

- people over age 50
- people who are immuno-compromised and/or qualify for medical parole
- individuals who have been granted parole and are waiting for a release date, and
- individuals who are within 6 months of their release date.

The bill sets up a team of local public defenders, public health experts, sheriffs, and district attorneys to oversee the decisions and system of release.

The bill also directs the Department of Correction and sheriffs to work with the state's COVID-19 Command Center to ensure that conditions are safe for those remaining incarcerated. Currently 72% of people held in state prisons sleep and eat within 6 feet of each other, according to the Massachusetts Department of Correction.

The Task Force is comprised of 76 organizations from across the Commonwealth – service providers, grassroots organizations, and policy advocacy organizations – with the goal of preventing and responding to health and economic inequities in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Galea is Dean and Robert A. Knox Professor, Boston University School of Public Health and serves as co-chair of the Task Force. Bartlett is CEO of the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center and serves as co-chair of the Task Force. Pavlos is Executive Director of Massachusetts Public Health Association, the convenor of the Task Force.

The Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA) is a nonprofit statewide organization focused on eliminating health inequities and creating healthy communities through advocacy, community organizing, and coalition-building.

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