

ACLU Wisconsin: Files Freedom of Information Act requests for Wisconsin Department of Corrections and Trump administrations' knowledge of potential COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons and jails

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MILWAUKEE — Today, the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin and 35 ACLU affiliates around the country filed coordinated public records requests with state Departments of Corrections and the Trump administration that seek information on what the elected and appointed officials knew about the potentially catastrophic impacts of COVID-19 on prisons and the communities surrounding them.

The ACLU of Wisconsin's records request follows the release of a [first-of-its-kind epidemiological model](#), which shows that as many as 200,000 people could die from COVID-19 — double the government estimate — if the federal government and states fail to release people from jails as part of the public health efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19. As of April 28, there have been 1,313 [incarcerated people and 335 staff members who have tested positive](#) in Bureau of Prison facilities. At least 30 incarcerated people have died. In response to the ACLU model, a Trump administration spokesperson refused to comment. The ACLU is now filing these requests to find out what the administration knew and when, as COVID-19 has begun to infect and kill people incarcerated in and working in federal and state prisons and jails as well as the surrounding communities.

The ACLU of Wisconsin is seeking records that will:

- Expose whether and when the Department of Corrections first understood the magnitude of the risk that COVID-19 posed to people living and working in state and federal prisons and the surrounding communities;
- Reveal whether models relied upon by the Department of Corrections were fundamentally flawed by failing to account for the magnifying effect that prisons have on the spread of COVID-19, inside and outside detention facilities;
- Seek copies of any recommendations made to prevent COVID-19 spread to see what was ignored;
- Discover communications, including emails, among senior officials as the first infections occurred within Wisconsin DOC and state facilities;
- Uncover first-hand complaints and grievances made directly by the staff and people incarcerated in Wisconsin who had prior knowledge of the horrifying lack of planning, hygiene, and care inside federal prisons as the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

“Public health experts in Wisconsin have rung multiple alarm bells about the spread of COVID-19 in our prison system. Despite those warnings, the depopulation of jails, prisons, and other detention facilities continues too slowly to avoid catastrophe,” said ACLU of Wisconsin executive director Chris Ott. “Our records request will show what the DOC knew about the impacts of COVID-19 on our prison system ahead of its spread but chose to ignore, and what they failed to discover by relying on faulty models.”

ACLU advocacy across the nation has led to at least 20,000 fewer people in jails and prisons, in order to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and to save lives, both within these institutions and in their surrounding communities. The ACLU is fighting for thousands more to be released to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

This release is online here:

<https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/news/aclu-wisconsin-files-foia-requests-wisconsin--department-corrections-and-trump-administrations>