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ACLU of Wisconsin calls on Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes to address COVID deaths in prisons

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MILWAUKEE — The ACLU of Wisconsin, and 18 other organizations, sent a letter to Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes today, asking him to address the pandemic inside Wisconsin prisons, and calling on him to push Gov. Tony Evers to use his clemency powers to release vulnerable people at higher risk of suffering adverse COVID-19 complications, as well as those who are already within six months to a year of their mandatory release.

Since the pandemic began, the ACLU of Wisconsin and its coalition partners have called on Gov. Tony Evers and Secretary Kevin Carr to immediately use the power granted to them under Wisconsin law to transfer medically at-risk people out of Wisconsin prisons.

So far, very little has been done to reduce the prison population. In June, the ACLU and the Prison Policy Initiative called Wisconsin's response to the outbreak a failure.

"Gov. Evers and Lt. Gov Barnes have failed to publicly recognize the severity of the situation, or do anything about it. Lt. Gov. Barnes grew up in 53206 – the zipcode with the highest incarceration rate in the country," said Sean Wilson, Smart Justice Campaign Manager of the ACLU of Wisconsin. "If he is unwilling to address the pandemic that is taking the lives of incarcerated people in Wisconsin prisons, then who will? Barnes has a responsibility to incarcerated people to have a discussion with Gov. Evers, and push him to decarcerate people to save lives. Barnes cannot turn a blind eye on this issue without also turning away from the community from which he came."

Lt. Gov. Barnes, who was a former organizer of Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH) early in his career, worked on criminal justice reform issues, however, he has been largely silent on this issue since being elected Lieutenant Governor.

“We need to know what, if anything, Barnes has done to protect those facing the pandemic behind Wisconsin prison walls, or whether he has had any discussions with Gov. Evers about this issue,” said Wilson. “This cannot be ignored; it is literally life or death.”

In addition to decarcerating prisons so social distancing becomes possible, the ACLU of Wisconsin and other organizations ask that everyone in prisons continue to have access to personal protective equipment and sanitizing supplies. Wearing masks, temperature checks and symptom monitoring should also be mandatory for all prison staff, as well as providing staff with sufficient paid sick leave.

To sign a petition asking that Lt. Gov. Barnes speak up for incarcerated people during the pandemic, go to action.aclu.org/send-message/WI-Barnes.

A copy of the letter is available online at: https://www.aclu-wi.org/sites/-default/files/field_documents/2020_1_15lettertoltgovbarnes.pdf

This statement is available online at: https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/-news/aclu-wisconsin-other-organizations-call-lt-gov-mandela-barnes-address-covid--deaths-prisons

The ACLU of Wisconsin is a non-profit, non-partisan, private organization whose 16,000 members support its efforts to defend the civil rights and liberties of all Wisconsin residents. For more on the ACLU of Wisconsin, visit our About Us page of this website, like us on Facebook or follow us on Twitter and Instagram.