

## Coalition calls for public health data about Covid19 in Ontario jails

TORONTO – July 7, 2020 Ontario must publicly disclose data about the prevalence of COVID-19 in provincial correctional facilities and the steps being taken to prevent the spread of the virus, according to a coalition made up of 10 Indigenous, Black, and legal organizations. Today the group wrote to Ontario's Solicitor General Sylvia Jones and the Deputy Solicitor General Deborah Richardson, who is responsible for corrections. They also filed a Freedom of Information Request. The government has 30 days to respond.

The coalition is made up of Aboriginal Legal Services, the Alliance for Healthier Communities, the Black Legal Action Centre, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the Criminal Law Group at Queen's University, Grand Council Treaty 3, the HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services and Queen's Prison Law Clinic.

“Indigenous people are over-represented in Ontario jails. Their families are worried about them and whether they have access to personal protective equipment since they can't maintain physical distancing,” said Emily Hill, senior staff lawyer at Aboriginal Legal Services. “Information about who is being tested is needed so we can plan for people's return to their communities. This helps keep everyone safe.”

The coalition has asked for regular, online reporting of data about testing and positive cases, broken down by institution, race, and gender. Included in the Freedom of Information application is a request for information about access to masks, which are mandatory for staff but are, according to information provided by the Solicitor General, only given to inmates when “necessary.”

“We know that people who live together face a higher risk. That's why there is a focus on releasing data about the testing and outbreaks people living in long term care and homeless shelters,” said Abby Deshman, Director, Criminal Justice Program, Canadian Civil Liberties Association “But Ontario hasn't released any numbers. We don't have any public information about testing or outbreaks in jails.”

The coalition is also asking for information about who has been released from correctional facilities since the pandemic began.

“The province has indicated that they have reduced the number of people in jail by 31% to help prevent the spread of Covid19, and we want to know how this reduction was achieved,” said Emily Hill, senior staff lawyer at Aboriginal Legal Services.

“Ready access to public health data, transparency, and accountability are essential tools to ensure the safety of our communities,” said Ryan Peck, Executive Director of the HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario.

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**Additional quotes:**

"The over-representation of Black people in both, provincial and federal correctional institutions, and other places of detention, is rooted in our country's history of colonialism, slavery and segregation. This historical context has produced stereotypes that link Blackness with criminality, and in turn, justifies the need to scrutinize and over-police Black communities. Failure to develop clear strategies will further harm Black populations and communities already bearing a heavier pandemic burden due to systemic and structural inequity," said Ruth Goba, Executive Director of the Black Legal Action Center, also speaking on behalf of the Alliance for Healthier Communities." —Black Legal Action Centre and Alliance for Healthier Communities, Joint Statement

**For media inquiries, please reach out directly to each coalition member to set up an interview.**

Emily Hill  
Aboriginal Legal Services, Senior Staff Lawyer  
416-408-4041 Ext.. 224  
[e\\_hill@lao.on.ca](mailto:e_hill@lao.on.ca)

Ruth Goba  
Black Legal Action Centre, Executive Director  
416-597-5831. Ext 35.  
[gobar@lao.on.ca](mailto:gobar@lao.on.ca)

Abby Dushman,  
Canadian Civil Liberties Association, Director, Criminal Justice Program  
647-786-9360  
[adeshman@ccla.org](mailto:adeshman@ccla.org),

Sané Dube  
Alliance for Healthier Communities, Policy and Government Relations Lead  
[sane.dube@allianceon.org](mailto:sane.dube@allianceon.org)