

National Veterans Council for Legal Redress (NVCLR)

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**Veterans Groups Demand that Gov. Lamont Release CT's
Incarcerated Veterans, Vulnerable Prisoners**

*NVCLR Executive Director Garry Monk: "Connecticut's Incarcerated Veterans Shouldn't
Face a Death Sentence" Due to COVID-19*

NEW HAVEN, CT— As [five prisoners reportedly tested positive for COVID-19](#) in the Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution—the only prison in Connecticut with a Veterans' Services Unit—the National Veterans Council for Legal Redress (NVCLR) and ten other veterans groups and advocacy organizations called on Connecticut to immediately release certain incarcerated veterans and other vulnerable persons. The letter, [available here](#), urged Governor Ned Lamont and Department of Correction (DOC) Commissioner Rollin Cook to furlough certain classes of prisoners, grant pretrial release to veterans and others, and identify safe transitional housing.

"COVID-19 will spread like wildfire through Connecticut's prisons," said **Garry Monk, Executive Director of NVCLR**. "It is imperative that Connecticut follow the lead of states like California, New York, and New Jersey and begin safely reducing the population of Connecticut's prisons. No-one—including the veterans who put their lives on the line to serve our country—should face a death sentence because they are incarcerated."

Other state jails — including [Rikers Island](#) in New York City, [Cook County Jail](#) in Illinois, and jails in [Michigan](#)—now face crisis levels of confirmed COVID-19 cases, as the novel coronavirus rapidly spreads through crowded prison dorms. Incarcerated veterans in the Veterans' Services Unit at Willard-Cybulski CI are likewise currently in considerable danger: the low security building lacks a hospital and houses prisoners in dorms, making it virtually impossible to isolate and contain the spread of the virus.

"Governor Lamont must fulfill his legal and moral duty to protect the health and safety of incarcerated people," said **Molly Petchenik, JD'21, a student in the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School, which represents NVCLR**. "Veterans have built-in community support networks, like the Department of Veterans Affairs, that would reduce the burden of their release on Connecticut's resources. During this crisis, incarcerated veterans at facilities like Willard-Cybulski CI therefore can and should be among the Governor's release priorities."

The letter demands that Connecticut take five steps to protect incarcerated veterans and thousands of others:

1. Immediately place on 45-day furlough all persons incarcerated in the Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution who can safely be placed in home environments;

2. Release through furlough or transitional supervision veterans and prisoners who are over age 55, have underlying health conditions recognized as COVID-19, are disabled, have less than 1 year left to serve, or have a custody level of 1 or 2;
3. Grant pretrial release of veterans and others charged with class D felonies;
4. Suspend normal housing approval protocols for parole and community services to allow veterans and others to safely transition back to their communities; and
5. Suspend new admissions to state prison facilities.

"As a veteran of the Vietnam War who has served time, I know very personally that your past misdeeds don't have to define your future," said **Conley Monk, Director at NVCLR**. "But if we refuse to protect incarcerated veterans and others from this virus, many prisoners may never have a chance to realize that future. Our governor must have the moral courage to take mercy on the lives of our state's most vulnerable, no matter their complicated pasts."

Relative to the general population, Connecticut's incarcerated veterans are generally older and particularly likely to develop severe illness from COVID-19 due to additional risk factors: around 20% of veterans over age 55 exiting prison have [diabetes](#), and many have [neuropsychiatric disorders](#) like PTSD which increase the incidence of severe cardiovascular disease.

"These trying times have forced the Governor to make some politically difficult choices," said **Steve Kennedy, Connecticut team leader, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA-CT)**. "Releasing incarcerated people may not be politically popular, but it will likely be a matter of life and death for people in the care of our state. I am confident that Governor Lamont and Commissioner Cook will do the right thing and use their existing discretionary powers to protect the lives of veterans and thousands of other vulnerable prisoners."

The National Veterans Council for Legal Redress is a Connecticut-based veterans service organization. In addition to NVCLR, signatories to the letter include: Connecticut Veterans Legal Center; Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America – Connecticut; National Veterans Legal Services Program; Swords to Plowshares; Common Defense; Disability Rights Connecticut; Chisolm Chisolm & Kilpatrick (veterans law practitioners); the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at the Yale Law School; and Dr. Madelon Baranoski (an expert on veterans' healthcare and a Professor of Law and Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine).