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MCEDSV STATEMENT ON JAIL AND PRISON RELEASE and COVID-19

The Michigan Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence (MCEDSV) represents over 73 domestic and sexual assault shelters and service providers. On behalf of our membership and victims of violence we issue the following statement:

MCEDSV believes a significant threat to victim safety at this time is the issue of possible COVID-19 related releases from jail and prison. We are deeply concerned that decisions to release prisoners are being made without carefully considering the safety and voices of crime victims. In addition, *releasing violent offenders into communities whose law enforcement resources are already over-burdened will jeopardize public safety.*

As a general matter, a categorical approach limiting considerations to offense category, ill health, or age should not be used in releasing offenders from jail or prison. These categories do not provide a complete picture that will help systems predict whether an offender can safely be released. For example, sexual offenders who prey on children can often continue to offend despite ill health or advanced age. It is a myth that older sex offenders become less likely to reoffend with age. Likewise, offenders often choose to commit crimes such as stalking and domestic violence regardless of age or health status.

Instead of a one-size-fits all approach, any and all prisoner releases require a careful, thoughtful, and individually evaluative process designed to release only those who pose no violent threat to the community. Those who pose real threats to an individual and/or the community should remain in custody, with institutions employing COVID-19 mitigation practices. Notably, a significant reduction in jail / prison census can be achieved without releasing violent offenders. For example, out of the 230 cases of sexual violence that on national average are reported to police only 4.6 of those offenders are incarcerated. (NISVIS 2017). The vast majority of incarcerated offenders

are not those who committed sexually violent offenses, possession of criminally sexual assaultive material, domestic violence, stalking or attempted murder/murder.

Victims /survivors who sought safety from the criminal legal system cannot be forgotten in these considerations. It would be profoundly unjust to force a victim to have to flee for their safety, possibly to a communal living shelter situation, because the offender's well-being and safety was prioritized. The current public health threat does not diminish the harm, fear, and danger caused by the offender's actions. The release of violent offenders, especially those who would return to the homes and communities of those they have harmed, cannot be the answer. It is imperative, especially during this time of state, national, and world crisis, to recognize that survivors need and deserve continued safety and protection.

If you or someone you know needs help, Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE), and the Michigan Sexual Assault VOICES4 Hotline (talk/text/chat 855-VOICES4). To find your local program in Michigan, visit <https://mcedsv.org/provider-directory/>