

# February First is “National Freedom Day”

*If abolition was the road to freedom, now is the time to finish the long journey.*

THE #CAGINGCOVID CAMPAIGN, LAUNCHED BY THE Nation Inside organization and supported by 60+ other groups, is planning to gather in D.C. on February 1st to deliver a petition to the Department of Justice. The DOJ has the responsibility to investigate health standards and civil rights violations in federal and state facilities. Other events are planned across the U.S. in support of mass clemency for people held in jails, prisons and detention centers.

Reports updated as of January 8, 2021 show over 329,298 prisoners have gotten COVID-19, and more than 2,020 have died as a result of it. The pandemic has resulted in prisons and jails abusing isolation more than ever before. *While social distance is a necessary precaution, solitary confinement is torture.*

Crowded quarters, a lack of PPE, inadequate medical care, an aging population, and unsanitary conditions have contributed to an infection rate 5.5 times higher than the already ballooned average in the U.S.

A quick and massive release of prisoners is the safest and most responsible option.  
*In reality, it's long overdue.*

February 1st was declared “National Freedom Day” in 1949, in a Presidential proclamation recognizing both the 1865 signing of the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery and 1948 U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. Yet all these years later, today's prisoners are still subjected to conditions those documents were thought to be addressing, from extreme medical neglect and the torture of isolation to outright slave labor.

Let your friends and family know that #CagingCOVID is inviting people to join them in a caravan to DC, where they will have a motorcade rally to hand-deliver their petition to the Department of Justice (DOJ), Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the United Nations (UN) office.

Encourage those on the outside to get involved. There are also countless local and regional targets to apply pressure on in furthering the demand of immediate clemency, amnesty, compassionate release and an end to the cash bail system.

*Turn the page for some suggestions on where people can celebrate National Freedom Day this year.*



HARRY S. TRUMAN

33rd President of the United States: 1945 - 1953

## Proclamation 2824—National Freedom Day

January 25, 1949

*By the President of the United States of America*

### A Proclamation

*Whereas*, near the end of the tragic conflict between the Northern and Southern States, the Congress adopted a joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution which would outlaw slavery in the United States and in every place subject to its jurisdiction; and

*Whereas* the resolution was signed by President Lincoln on February 1, 1865, and thereafter led to the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution; and

*Whereas* that Amendment is a corner stone in the foundation of our American traditions, and the signing of the resolution is a landmark in the Nation's effort to fulfill the principles of freedom and justice proclaimed in the first ten amendments to the Constitution; and

*Whereas*, by a joint resolution approved June 30, 1948 (62 Stat. 1150), the Congress authorized the President to proclaim the first day of February of each year as National Freedom Day in commemoration of the signing of the resolution of February 1, 1865; and

*Whereas* the Government and people of the United States wholeheartedly support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, which declares that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world";

*Now, Therefore, I, Harry S. Truman, President of the United States of America, do hereby designate February 1, 1949, and each succeeding February 1, as national Freedom Day; and I call upon the people of the United States to pause on that day in solemn contemplation of the glorious blessings of freedom which we humbly and thankfully enjoy.*

*In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States of America to be affixed.*

*Done at the City of Washington this 25th day of January in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and forty-nine, and of the Independence of the United States of America the one hundred and seventy-third.*



# No More COVID-19 Deaths in Prisons and Jails

- End Cash Bail
- Demand Clemency & Amnesty
- Grant Compassionate Release
- Abolish ICE
- Defund Police

**National Freedom Day**  
**February 1st, 2021**  
**#CagingCOVID**

**Caravan to D.C. or take action locally**

## NationInside.org

### TAKING THE MESSAGE OF FREEDOM FROM INCARCERATION TO THE STREETS!

**Governor's homes:** In many states, Governors have a unique ability to grant clemency, pardons, reprieve, etc, and can do so swiftly in times of emergency such as this.

**A local jail or prison near you:** Make noise to let prisoners and detainees know you are out there. A prison noise demo is a First Amendment protected activity and it sends a message up the chain to officials who fear demonstrations spreading across the wall.

**Regional offices of the DOJ, CDC and UN:** Help amplify the #CagingCOVID petition demands by having a presence at these offices as well.

**A busy intersection, interstate or shopping area:** Reach people on the street. Some times a little disruption can also generate more attention and media coverage that reaches thousands more.

**Get creative!** Put out flyers and posters, drop banners in visible locations, coordinate phone zaps and social media blasts, affinity group style actions at strategic locations... Just be sure to wear a mask, wash your hands and practice social distance while you do any in-person activity.



## BACKGROUND ON THE COVID-19 IN PRISONS

This year of pandemic has highlighted how incarceration fails at ensuring public safety but excels at violating human rights. Agency heads and elected officials have watched for 10 months now as COVID-19 cases in their prison systems have spiked and spread, with a massively underwhelming response. As of releasing this call-to-action, a new, faster spreading mutation, the B.1.1.7 strain, has been identified in California, Colorado, Florida and New York. Public health experts expect it to be identified in more states in the coming days.

A supposed cornerstone of the legal system is that its *“better for ten guilty persons to escape than that one innocent suffer.”* But in the case of COVID-19, people are suffering and dying in jails without ever having faced trial, when they could have survived in their own home or a hospital; in prisons, people are dying who were convicted (though too often through plea bargains, coerced testimony and factual innocence), but not sentenced to death.

By the state’s own laws, as well as international treaties, this is a far overstep of state power. Its cruel and unusual punishment, its medical neglect. Its state terrorism.

COVID-19 isn’t the first public health atrocity in the prison system, but it has allowed people to see a fuller picture of what mass incarceration means. It has opened the eyes of many to a problem that has lingered for the past 150 years. There are enough parallels on a local or regional level to say the sort of medical neglect and abuse that COVID is highlighting is actually quite commonplace (such as Legionnaire’s Disease and Valley Fever, or extreme exposure to black mold, asbestos, radon, coal ash dust, and even methane from sewage leaks), and that is the problem.

The clearest way to get people who are held in state custody out of harm’s way from the pandemic, and the plethora of pre-existing abuses it has highlighted, is through expedited executive clemency or compassionate release. Each state has different policies surrounding this, and we need to understand them and push hard for them to be used. Releases have happened in some facilities across the country, showing that it is possible. But thus far, it has been way too little, much too late.

In federal prisons alone, more than 14,000 clemency seekers are waiting for verdicts on their applications to the Justice Department. But the backlog is not new. In 2014, the Obama administration unveiled a clemency

initiative that created new criteria for commutations, with as many as 10,000 inmates expected to qualify. The administration disappointingly granted a mere 1,696. That has to change fast.

Mass releases from the federal system can and should be an example for states to follow. Especially under a new administration that has claimed to plan on correcting its disastrous policy decisions in manufacturing mass incarceration over the past 40 years.

## WHAT IS “NATIONAL FREEDOM DAY”?

It’s an obscure holiday to most, but perhaps one we should be getting more familiar with, figuring out how to reclaim it, and holding the U.S. to it.

A 1949 U.S. Presidential Proclamation created National Freedom Day to commemorate both the passage of the 13th Amendment on that day 84 years before and the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations a year prior, which declares that *“recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”*

While we know we can’t expect liberation to come willingly from an empire built on slavery and land theft, we need to use strategic moments and symbols to build struggle around. We can make February 1, 2021 one of these.

*Image below “No Executions by COVID-19” banner at news conference outside San Quentin State Prison, July 9, 2020, in San Quentin, Calif. A group of legislators, advocates, academics and public health officials gathered at San Quentin State Prison to discuss a COVID-19 outbreak at the facility that has sickened more than 1,400 inmates with six deaths.*

*(AP Photo/Eric Risberg)*



# In Memory of Karen Smith



## A TRIBUTE TO KAREN SMITH, REST IN POWER

*She was the founder of Gainesville IWOC and Florida Prisoner Solidarity, as well as an organizer on Fight Toxic Prisons Convergence committees. Shortly before her death, she launched the #CagingCOVID campaign with Nation Inside and we remain committed to honoring her legacy by continuing the organizing she was so dedicated to. The following is an excerpt from a tribute written by a close friend of Karen's.*

BY PANAGIOTI TSOLKAS / ANTISTASIS PROJECT

Karen passed on to the ancestors' realm in the early hours of Nov 29, 2020 as the result of a fatal car accident near Waldo, Florida.

It's hard to describe what organizing alongside Karen Smith was like in a way that won't sound hyperbolic on account of her absence. Movement circles can get bogged down and organizers often get overwhelmed by the magnitude of what we face. It's inevitable, yet Karen Smith figured out how to manage it all with a rare style and grace. She dodged the obstacles, confronted the bullshit and stayed focused on her two-pronged mission of supporting prisoners and attacking the prison system, relentlessly. All while

being an amazing mother of two and stellar friend to so many.

Since her passing, several of us who had the fortune of organizing closely with her have noted the feeling of disbelief stemming from a view of her as invincible, unstoppable... a supernatural creature walking among us. The organizational energy that she could harness in planning protests, conferences, bail funds, and social events is unmatched. She could motivate and focus a group without it feeling pushy, and she could host a killer party without seeming stressed, and then totally chill out and relax without seeming high-strung from pulling these things together. She was also an incredible example as a parent that people with kids can balance movement responsibilities and commitments to their children.

She could get wild as hell, then pull it all together to show up for

media interviews, professional appointments, her job as a waitress, etc. When she had to step back to handle work or family matters, she didn't make commitments she couldn't keep and drop the ball.

When Florida Prisoner Solidarity held a campout out in front of prison work camp for 10 days, Karen would come after a late work shift to sleep at the camp, roll out of a tent first thing in the morning with a bullhorn in hand to yell raw, unfiltered rage at guards and shout encouragement to prisoners, then drink some coffee and head back to town to the Sunday brunch shift at 706, where she worked for the past 15 years, till they closed for COVID-19.

I know, I told you, it sounds like the kind of things you say to kiss someone's ass after they're gone. And she would surely be annoyed by praise like this, but ask around, these are the stories you'll hear over and over, from people who met her once and people who knew her for decades.

So many times over the past several years I watched in awe at her ability to connect with people and inspire them to action, in many cases just with a paper, pen and stamped envelope. At prison demos, when we were close enough to establish that those inside could hear our bullhorns, she would often say "this is Karen Smith, call us, write our PO Box. Let us



know how we can work together.” And they would. On the occasion where someone made the unwise decisions to write something sexist or disrespectful, Karen would tell them firmly to cut that shit out. And they listened. She could command respect like that, even from someone she never met in person.

At any given point in a day, she might step away from a conversation with you to take a phone call, and come back having coordinated a legal defense strategy with someone sitting in solitary. By the end of the day there would be a phone zap going to support their fight for law library access, better sanitary conditions in the kitchen or getting moved out of solitary...

Being in her presence had the feeling of working alongside a legend, those who got letters from her on the inside will say the same. Perhaps the highest compliment to her work is knowing so many wardens and prison staff across Florida and beyond have cursed her name, surely wondering themselves if she was a real person or some fictitious, omnipresent force out to kick their ass.

In her last hours, she helped a friend and homestead-mate on creating a hip hop video highlighting prisons, police and food justice (she was part of an effort to get free produce into the neighborhoods of southeast Gainesville). The last images captured from her life are videos of her dancing around a raging bonfire draped in a protest banner while an effigy of the Florida prison system burned to the ground. Seriously.

Now we get to carry her work of toppling the prison system forward, and though it's daunting, it truly feels like an honor to be part of that legacy. With her memory and her spirit to drive us, we will fight inside and out, harder than we ever imagined possible, till the walls come crumbling down and every cage is reduced to ash, as were the slave plantations that came before them.

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## REMEMBERING MICHAEL VINSON

A dear friend, beloved community organizer, AIWOC activist and freedom fighter in Columbus, OH, Michael Vinson, also passed this summer. In his memory, members of Michael's family, along with a couple of his friends have started a project called Michael's Way to provide support to families of incarcerated people. Their first project was a holiday gift drive for children and families.

From Michael's aunt: *"We want to be a light to these individuals, and their families, whose lives have been touched by a form of darkness where the family unit has been torn apart due to the mother, father, sister, brother, son, or daughter being absent from the family."*

Michael had a vision that went far beyond just these causes but he had an international vision to advocate for those touched by systemic racism, and social and criminal injustice.

EXCERPT FROM HIS OBITUARY: Michael "Mike" Allen Vinson, age 41 of Columbus Ohio, entered the realm of eternal peace and rest on 14 July 2020. Michael was a beautiful, compassionate, humorous, outspoken shining light!

He was family oriented. He loved teaching children about their heritage and tried to be a good example for the young men of his family. Mike was also a veteran of the United States Air Force and a devoted community organizer, proud revolutionary socialist, prison abolitionist and leader that was never intimidated to say what was on his mind and fought for economic empowerment and social change.

When it was time to protest against injustice and police brutality, he was there. Although his chronic illness presented challenges for him, he always tried to make an effort for change! Mike was

*(continued on the next page)*



honored for his political and educational advocacy by our community with the Democratic Socialists of Central Ohio Eugene V. Debs award. Mike's commitment to improving the quality of life for his people was and still is an inspiration for us all to do the same. He will forever be loved and missed!

**NOTE FROM THE EDITORS:** The past year was a difficult one for many of us. We shared these two stories of loved ones from the movement who we have lost as one way to process the collective grief around their passing and also to highlight that even in loss, we must find the beauty and passion for living that can move us forward towards a better future. To the thousands who have lost their lives to the pandemic, police or prison system, you are not forgotten, we carry you with us as we continue to struggle towards freedom, *for all of us or none.*

This mailing is a collaboration of several groups, including Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, Fight Toxic Prisons, Nation Inside and FL Prisoner Solidarity. Letters can be sent to: Caging COVID c/o Civic Media Center, 433 S Main Street, Gainesville, FL 32601. Thought we cannot guarantee responses. YOU CAN CALL TO SHARE YOUR STORY THROUGH THE NATION INSIDE STORYLINE 24/7 AT (910) 604-6519

**In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nation Inside's #CagingCOVID campaign encourages all people in prison with pre-existing health conditions that may result in greater harm from the impact of this virus to immediately apply for early release.**

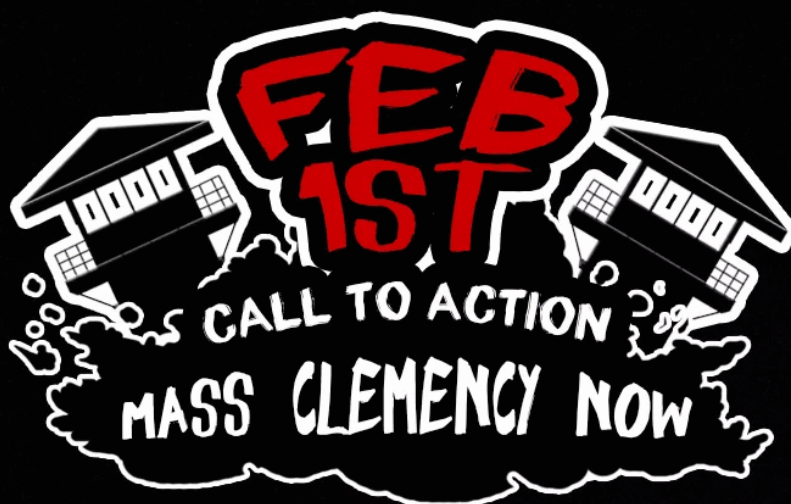
This process varies from state-to-state and may come in the form of clemency, compassionate release, commutations, pardons, reprieve, or the reduction/elimination of bail bonds in pre-trial cases.

In some states, "reprieves" are exempted from more arduous requirements to ensure a governor's ability to act swiftly in times of emergency such as this to suspend sentencing on a limited or indefinite basis.

NYU Law School has compiled an exhaustive list of state-by-state laws surrounding reprieve power, available online here: [LAW.NYU.EDU/CENTERS/ADMINOFCRIMINALLAW/COVID-19](http://LAW.NYU.EDU/CENTERS/ADMINOFCRIMINALLAW/COVID-19)

Families Against Mandatory Minimums has compiled an extensive list of resources, with a focus on federal prisoners which can be found here: [FAMM.ORG/COVIDRESPONSE/](http://FAMM.ORG/COVIDRESPONSE/)

For a longer list of resources, #CagingCOVID can be reached at [INFO@NATIONINSIDE.ORG](mailto:INFO@NATIONINSIDE.ORG)  
*Unfortunately we don't currently have staff available to handle phone or regular letter correspondence.*



**#CAGINGCOVID**

**2,020 DEATHS  
329,298 POSITIVE CASES  
5.5X HIGHER INFECTION RATES**

**DUE TO INHUMAN CONDITIONS IN JAILS,  
PRISONS, AND DETENTION CENTERS**

**THE ANTISTASIS PROJECT CALLS FOR  
DECENTRALIZED ACTIONS ON FEBRUARY 1ST  
ACROSS THE SO-CALLED UNITED STATES, AND  
INTERNATIONALLY, IN SUPPORT OF MASS  
CLEMENCY FOR PRISONERS AND DETAINEES.**

**LEARN MORE AT** [bit.ly/38IwcCC](http://bit.ly/38IwcCC)