



# Lewisburg Prison Project

2020

## President's Message

*“You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world's problems at once but don't ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own.” - Michelle Obama*

I began volunteering at the Lewisburg Prison Project (LPP) during the fall of 2000. This year, the state of our country is affecting the lives of incarcerated people in a manner I have not witnessed in my 20 years of involvement. COVID-19 has not only placed our collective health and safety at risk, but has also made explicit deep-rooted structural racism. The impact of this crisis on our most vulnerable and marginalized communities, especially incarcerated people, has been devastating. For incarcerated people, exposure to a deadly virus is now a punishment they were not sentenced to. In addition, people of color are incarcerated at a much higher rate, compounding these injustices. Though I write this on the day Biden and Harris are announced as president- and vice-president-elect, my hope is somewhat contained because today also marks a record high of COVID-19 cases. The need for courage is paramount.

I want to thank our staff, who have adjusted to working from home, taking turns in the office and navigating constant workflow changes while responding to a new caseload of COVID-19 concerns and monitoring how prisons respond to the pandemic. In the middle of these changes, over 900 incarcerated people were relocated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons to USP Lewisburg after a tornado damaged a medium-security federal prison in South Carolina. In response, LPP staff took countless calls

from family members who were concerned about the wellbeing of their incarcerated loved ones.

Our staff communicate daily with incarcerated people in Pennsylvania, monitoring the constant changes in how county, state, and federal prisons operate during this pandemic. Before the pandemic began, people in prison already faced constant challenges to their constitutional rights. Those challenges persist and are intensified by COVID-19 restrictions and procedures. Throughout this year, our staff have also persisted in directly advising and advocating for our clients. Thank you, staff, for your dedication and efforts.

In the following pages we announce our Black Lives Matter Statement, discuss systemic racism and mass incarceration, and take a detailed look at COVID-19 in prisons. We also inform our members of an important new direction in LPP's work for the coming year, provide an office update, and introduce our newest employee, Stina Stannik.

Your membership is appreciated and necessary. We hope you will continue to follow LPP's work. You can support us financially or by becoming a volunteer. Whatever your comfort and interest level, please feel free to reach out to our staff at any time to see how you can be involved. - *Angela Trop, Board President*

## **LPP Statement on Systemic Racism and Incarceration**

The Lewisburg Prison Project denounces racism, especially in our local community, including county jails, state prisons, and federal institutions.

We are dedicated to the principle that people who are incarcerated have incontestable human and constitutional rights.

We know that people of color are more likely than white people to be stopped and arrested by cops, charged by the criminal legal system, and incarcerated for longer sentences.

We recognize that our local economy is supported by the mass incarceration of BIPOC.

We acknowledge that most instances of racial discrimination that occur in prison go unaddressed. In our work, we hear of daily racist violence and abuse occurring in prisons in our region.

We stand in solidarity with If Not Us Then Who, who are raising awareness of systemic racism in our local Susquehanna Valley communities.

We pledge to be accountable, to seek justice, and to challenge racism and white supremacy.

**Black Lives Matter.**

## **Racism and Mass Incarceration**

The recorded murder of George Floyd has catalyzed a national movement addressing police violence against Black people in the United States. However, unsurprisingly, racism is not limited to police violence but rather permeates the entire criminal legal system. Black people are more likely than white people to be arrested; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; once convicted, they are more likely to experience lengthy prison sentences; and once released, they are more likely to face obstacles. The racial disparities affect youth as well as adults and are especially harsh on those who are additionally marginalized, for example, by gender or class.

### **Policing**

Black people are 63% more likely to be stopped by police than white people (while white people are 58%

more likely to call the police than Black people). Of those who have contact with the police, Black people are 2.5 times more likely than white people to experience the use of force. For Latinx people, it is nearly the same. Black youth are arrested at a rate 2.7 times white youth and are 4.4 times more likely to be confined.

### **Pretrial**

The number of people incarcerated pretrial in the US has exploded to nearly half a million people, triple what it was 20 years ago. Black people are 7.7 times more likely to be detained pretrial than white people, due to both the extreme influence of wealth in our criminal justice system and to bias in prosecutor charging. The impact extends to families: two-thirds of the women who cannot afford bail have minor children. Pretrial detention has also been

shown to increase the odds of conviction, to increase the length of sentences, and to make the detainee more likely to accept less favorable plea deals.

### Prison

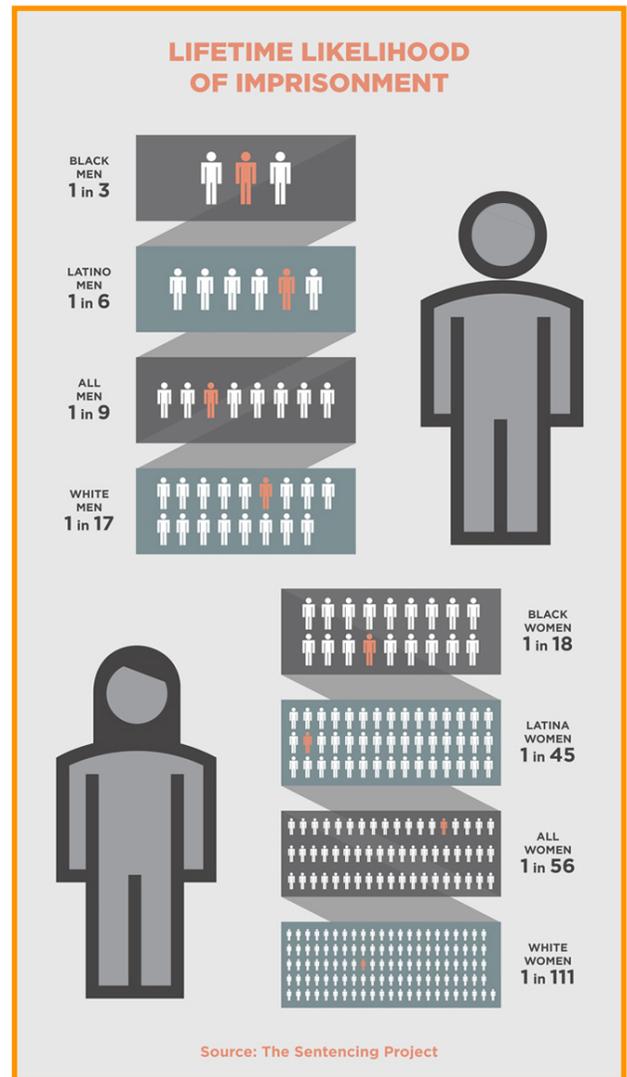
Black people are incarcerated at local jails at a rate 3.2 times that of white people, and Black men are 5.8 times more likely to be in federal and state prison than white men. Black people are 7 times more likely than white people to be serving life or greater-than-50-year sentences and 4.6 times more likely to be on death row. Among the prison population, Black men are 27% more likely to be placed in solitary confinement than white men, and Black women are more than twice as likely as white women.

### Parole

The shift towards fixed-length sentencing has reduced the portion of the prison population eligible for discretionary release on parole, but of those eligible, studies have found that parole board decisions have a racial bias, due in part to comparable in-prison conduct resulting in divergent prison disciplinary records. The largest source of such disparities is infractions issued at the discretion of guards.

### After Release

All formerly incarcerated people face an increased struggle to find employment; for formerly incarcerated white men and women, the unemployment rates are 18% and 23%, but for Black men and women they are 35% and 44%. Formerly incarcerated Black people are 62% more likely to end up homeless than white people. One third of Black men have a felony conviction on their record, which impacts not only future employment but also future housing, federal student aid, occupational licensing, voting rights, and more.



These grim statistics have deep, systemic roots and will take sustained and concerted effort to address. The Sentencing Project, in its [Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System](#), recommends the following measures: ending the war on drugs, eliminating mandatory minimum sentences, reducing the use of cash bail, fully funding indigent defense agencies, adopting federal and state policies requiring the use of racial impact statements for proposed sentencing policies, developing and implementing training to reduce racial bias, and addressing collateral consequences in the areas of employment, education, housing, social programs, and voting rights. *The data cited above are*

# COVID-19 IN PENNSYLVANIA'S PRISONS AND JAILS

*from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and from The Sentencing Project.*

## **People in Prison are at Risk**

Prisons and jails around the country have become hot spots for COVID-19 outbreaks. Close living quarters and large populations make social distancing impossible and place incarcerated people at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Many people in prisons have chronic medical conditions, meaning that if they were to catch the virus, they would have a high chance of becoming severely ill or dying. Further, prisons are not isolated from the public. Administrative staff, correctional officers, medical personnel, and new intakes enter and exit these institutions daily, and each has the potential to bring in COVID-19.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the PA Department of Corrections (PA DOC) claimed to create opportunities for early release, so that prison populations could be reduced. Despite these pathways the BOP has only approved around 7,700 people for home confinement nationwide, while their total population remains over 125,000. The PA DOC has granted reprieve to 115 people, less than 1% of their total incarcerated population.

At the county level, state courts were closed for months under an emergency order, leaving many people sitting in county jails with no court dates, while police continued to arrest and bring people in. This caused overcrowding in some jails, increasing the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak.

## **Prison Conditions During COVID-19**

In Pennsylvania, prisons and jails have had varied responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prison administrations should take the necessary measures to prevent the spread of the virus while maintaining the constitutional rights of their incarcerated population. While this may require new procedures and planning, prison administrations should not use

the pandemic as a means to restrict or violate the

**“I am in fear of my life. I have not nor has many of the other inmates here been sentenced to death. But I truly feel that many of us are facing a death sentence due to the inadequate and inhumane conditions of this prison.”**

- LPP Client, incarcerated during COVID-19

rights of people in prison.

However, most institutions have severely restricted the rights of incarcerated people, placing them in lockdown 20-24 hours a day. These lockdowns dramatically reduce out-of-cell time for incarcerated people, meaning that they have little to no recreation, visits, and phone access. They also have limited access to medical staff, programs, legal assistance, and religious services.

Most concerning is that many prisons have failed to adopt or enforce the appropriate measures to prevent the virus from spreading, such as establishing adequate quarantine and isolation procedures, providing soap and cleaning supplies, and requiring staff to wear masks.

As a result, our clients are deeply concerned about their health and safety at this time.

## **Monitoring & Advocacy**

The staff at the Lewisburg Prison Project and the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project have been working together since March to monitor the conditions of prisons and jails across Pennsylvania by writing to our clients, speaking with their families,

and checking case and testing numbers on the [BOP](#) and [PA DOC](#) websites.

In April, we created a [COVID-19 info sheet](#) for incarcerated people that provides basic information about the virus, how they can protect themselves, and what prisons and jails should be doing to protect them. As of November 15, 2020, we have provided hundreds of info sheets to people incarcerated in Pennsylvania and throughout the country.

In addition, we send out COVID-19 questionnaires to determine the specific conditions of prisons and jails and if their administrations are taking the correct measures to protect their populations. As of November 15, 2020 we have received over 100 completed questionnaires from people incarcerated in Pennsylvania.

Based on the information gathered from questionnaires, letters, and legal calls, we then provide direct advice to those who need it. We also advocate for entire prison populations when the actions of their administrations have placed their lives at risk.

In July we wrote a [letter](#) on behalf of those who were transferred to USP Lewisburg concerning their

treatment by staff, COVID-19 precautions, and the environmental conditions of the prison.

In September, we wrote a [letter](#) on behalf of those in Dauphin County Prison. Our letter addressed four major concerns: their quarantine and isolation procedures; precautions for people at risk; facemasks, cleaning and hygiene; and general environmental conditions and safety.

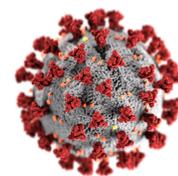
Other advocacy letters were written on behalf of clients at USP Allenwood, FCI Schuylkill, and SCI Coal Township.

From July through November we were joined by attorney Jennifer Tobin, 2018 Patten Award Recipient, and legal assistant Terrell Mosely, both of whom helped the Lewisburg Prison Project handle the new COVID-19 intake and caseload.

As the pandemic continues and COVID-19 cases once again are on the rise, we will continue to monitor the conditions in Pennsylvania institutions and respond to the constitutional violations we identify.

## HOW SHOULD PRISONS RESPOND TO COVID-19?

- 1. Limit exposure and enforce social distancing measures**
- 2. Regularly provide clean masks and soap**
- 3. Clean and sanitize common items and areas**
- 4. Monitor symptoms**
- 5. Isolate people with positive cases**
- 6. Quarantine people with pending tests**
- 7. Provide access to necessary services, such as medical care**
- 8. Provide regular access to recreation and out-of-cell time**



## **LPP Begins Focus on Sexual Violence and Gender Issues under IOLTA Grant**

LPP's affiliate, the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project, was awarded a grant this year from the Interest on Lawyers Trust Account, known as IOLTA. The award will provide funding to maintain the presence of a full-time attorney, Amy Ernst, in the LPP office. Specifically, the funds will allow for the PA Institutional Law Project and Lewisburg Prison Project to assist incarcerated women and people who are transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming in the Northeast Zone of Pennsylvania.

The IOLTA grant can continue for up to three years based on the assistance provided to the identified population. Unfortunately, there is plenty of need. Incarcerated women are a rapidly growing

population with specific needs and concerns related to medical care and personal safety. The IOLTA grant will also allow a focus on gender-based violence, allowing PILP and LPP to step into the evolving area of law around the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming incarcerated people. As stated in the proposal, "this particularly vulnerable population is often misgendered, provided inadequate medical care by providers without expertise in transgender healthcare, targeted for assault, or housed in solitary confinement to allegedly protect them from the general population." Thank you to the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project for seeking the IOLTA funding and funding our attorney in the Lewisburg office.



## **Lewisburg Prison Project Office Update**

### **Welcome Stina Stannik**

The Lewisburg Prison Project is pleased to welcome our newest paralegal, Stina Stannik. Her start in March 2020 was "perfectly" timed given her love of hiking in the area and the need for increased support for incarcerated people in our area as a result of COVID-19.

Stina graduated from Tufts University with a Bachelor of Arts in Peace and Justice Studies. She has worked for the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Reproductive Rights. She additionally spent two years in Rwanda as an education consultant in the Peace Corps. She brings an impressive range of skills to our office ranging from administrative planning to grant writing to policy advocacy. We are lucky to have her experience and skills in this difficult time and are looking forward to spending more time with her both on Zoom and perhaps in person in 2021.



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## Thank You Terrell Mosely



The pandemic has created new challenges for everyone, including the Lewisburg Prison Project. Not only have we faced the challenges of keeping our staff healthy by working from home whenever possible, the volume of letters has also increased during the pandemic. Fortunately, with funding provided to legal service organizations by the CARES Act, the Prison Project was able to hire Terrell Mosley part-time to support our work. Terrell has been assisting staff with the intake of all letters received at the office.

In addition to working with us, Terrell works with the Susquehanna Valley Mediation Center with its new Prison Reentry Mediation Program, which “aims to create stronger, healthier communities by working with formerly incarcerated people before, during, and after their release from prison to constructively address conflict in their personal lives and living situations.” Many thanks to Terrell for stepping in to work on behalf of incarcerated people in both of these contexts.

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## Call for Volunteers

Despite the overwhelm of 2020, we are hopeful that 2021 will allow us to increase our presence at county prison board meetings in the Middle District of Pennsylvania, and to do this we will need volunteers! Our goal in having LPP volunteers present at these meetings—most of them virtual at this point—is to listen for any concerns discussed that are relevant to conditions of confinement, such as access to medical care, staffing levels, facilities and conditions, COVID-19 protocols, and the like. Our hope is to learn more about the specific topics being raised at each prison and to note any issues that reflect on client needs or prison conditions. Training will be provided to all volunteers. Our aim is to identify enough volunteers to cover the monthly prison board meetings in the following counties: Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Dauphin, Lackawanna, Lycoming, Luzerne, Montour, Northumberland, and Union. If you or a group you’re a part of are willing to serve as prison board meeting volunteers, please contact Angela at [info@lewisburgprisonproject.org](mailto:info@lewisburgprisonproject.org). We hope to have as many eyes and ears as possible paying attention to what is shared at these meetings so that, through community participation and observation, we may help improve the conditions of confinement for people incarcerated in our region.

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## LPP Board of Directors

Paul Susman and Karen Morin have provided multiple decades of service with the LPP. During 2020, they have both retired from the board of directors. Their time and effort, their historical understanding, and their social justice hearts have made the difference in this organization. Board meetings will feel different without their presence. We are thankful for their years of leadership. Thank you, Paul and Karen, for your dedication and leadership.

**Lewisburg Prison Project**  
P.O. Box 128  
Lewisburg, PA 17837

## **Lewisburg Prison Project Mission**

The Lewisburg Prison Project, Inc. is a non-profit organization that provides advocacy, information, and legal assistance to people incarcerated in Pennsylvania regarding their conditions of confinement. We also provide inmates across the United States with information and legal bulletins regarding conditions of confinement.

We are dedicated to the principle that prisoners are persons with incontestable human and constitutional rights.



## ***THANK YOU***

*We would like to thank our supporters, donors, and all of the volunteers who have supported us this year.*

*We would like to thank Bucknell juniors Megan Lutz and Cynthia Mendoza, who are our first volunteers/ interns to assist with this endeavor, as well as Lauren Canna, who volunteered in-office before COVID-19 restrictions began.*