



NATSILS

National Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

TRUE JUSTICE FOR OUR PEOPLE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

21 July 2020

MEDIA RELEASE : Victorian Government risks COVID-19 prison outbreak and must urgently release people from prison to prevent COVID-19 black deaths in custody

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) is extremely concerned at four positive COVID-19 cases in Victorian prisons, six adult and two youth prisons in lockdown and a second wave of the virus in Victoria. NATSILS calls for the Victorian Government to urgently and responsibly release Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from prison to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody due to COVID-19.

“Our worst fears are confirmed with COVID-19 in adult and youth prisons in Victoria. This is escalating rapidly, with serious risk of a prison outbreak. COVID-19 positive prison officers who move in and out of prisons will place both people in prison and the wider community at risk. The Victorian Government must urgently and responsibly release at risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from adult and youth prisons, due to our high vulnerability to severe and lethal impacts of COVID-19,” said Nerita Waight, co-chair of NATSILS.

“Many of our people in prison in Victoria are on remand for minor offences. Rolling back the harsh and unjust bail reforms will ensure that our children, young people and adults on remand, who are yet to be found guilty of any criminal offending and who pose a low risk to the community are released.”

“COVID-19 has spread like wildfire in prisons overseas. Many people in prisons as well as corrections officers have already contracted the virus and died. The United Kingdom, Canada, Indonesia, Germany and the United States have already released people to contain the spread of the virus. We must follow their example to prevent COVID-19 black deaths in custody.”

NATSILS joins this week’s calls for release from legal services including [Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Human Rights Law Centre](#). In April, NATSILS released its [COVID-19 policy statement](#) calling for Australian governments to take a range of justice-related measures to stop the spread of the virus including on diversion, policing, bail, testing, medical care, housing and social supports.

In April, families whose loved ones died in custody released an [open letter to governments](#) calling for the release of First Nations people from prison. Hundreds of academics, experts and organisations also signed onto open letters calling for the release of people from prison. In June, thousands of people marched for Black Lives Matter protests.



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“Victoria is at risk of a severe prison outbreak. COVID-19 will impact our imprisoned children and adults the hardest because many of them are already chronically ill, are living with disability or they are parents with children who depend on them. We’re also concerned about the human rights compliance of lockdown restrictions, especially isolation,” said Cheryl Axleby, Co-Chair of NATSILS.

“The decisions that we all make during the second wave will determine whether our communities fall apart or come together. Release of vulnerable imprisoned people is a practical, smart and evidence-based solution to stop the spread of COVID-19 and ensure there are sufficient hospital beds for everyone who urgently needs them.”

END OF RELEASE

The policy position can be found [here](#)

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