

PRESS GUIDELINES

COVID-19 & Commitment to Using Human Centered Language when Reporting

*“Ultimately, our humanity depends on everyone’s humanity... I’ve come to understand and to believe that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I believe that for every person on the planet. I think if somebody tells a lie, they’re not just a liar. I think if somebody takes something that doesn’t belong to them, they’re not just a thief. I think even if you kill someone, you’re not just a killer. And because of that there’s this basic human dignity that must be respected by law.” – Bryan Stevenson, **“We Need to Talk About an Injustice”***

These guidelines are being shared by the #HonorLivesLost network, a coalition of organizers and advocates dedicated to memorializing and uplifting incarcerated people we lose to COVID-19 and #DeathByIncarceration in California. We are challenging reporters who write about these topics to change the way they speak about people who are impacted by criminalization and incarceration. While this has always been an important commitment, there is increased urgency in the context of a pandemic that so disproportionately threatens the lives of incarcerated people. We hope you will join us in affirming that every person is deserving of life and health, and avoid the dehumanizing and degrading language that is so often used against incarcerated people and their families.

We ask you to commit to using human-centered language because it is both accurate and respectful. Static labels such as “inmate” negate the fuller identity of a person, who may be a child, a parent, a student, a teacher, an advocate, and more. Words like “convict” and “felon” are full of stigma; they hurt incarcerated people and their families, and this is all the more painful when the topic is death. It is both unnecessary and harmful to use descriptors that make a claim of guilt or innocence, and attach a narrow and permanent identity to an often temporary status. Journalists have an ethical obligation to use objective language while reporting; language that is demonizing is not objective. We ask that journalists rely on human-centered language and avoid any harmful jargon to better meet that obligation. The media has immense power to either reinforce stereotypes or break them down and we hope your ethical commitment leans towards breaking them down, moving us all closer to the truth about people and our society.

CORRECT: person in prison, incarcerated person, person with a conviction

INCORRECT: inmate, felon, offender, criminal

CORRECT: formerly incarcerated person, person on parole

INCORRECT: ex-convict, ex-con, ex-offender, parolee

Questions we need reporters to be asking:

- How is the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and/or Department of Public Health tracking COVID-19 deaths inside CA prisons?
- What are some immediate actions the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation are taking to communicate with the family members of people who are tested positive of COVID-19?

- How can we know the actual number of confirmed COVID-19 cases inside California state prisons without widespread testing? What is the current testing protocol of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation?

Example of Problematic Reporting:

[2 CT Prisoners Die Due to COVID-19 on Same Day](#)

*“The second was **a 51-year-old man** who was receiving treatment at the Northern Correctional Institution’s Medical Isolation Unit in Somers since April 24. Northern Correctional has been used as an isolation center for COVID-19 positive **inmates** across the state’s system. Officials said on Sunday he was taken to the hospital for further treatment, where he died Monday. That man was **servicing a 42-year, six-month sentence for murder** and had been in the Department of Correction system since June 1992.”*

Example of Good Reporting:

[“A Public Health Doctor and Head of Corrections Agree: We Must Immediately Release People from Jails and Prisons.” The Appeal, March 27, 2020](#)

*“The COVID-19 epidemic is quickly finding its way into every corner of the nation, and in a growing number of states — Georgia, New York, Illinois, Massachusetts, California, and Louisiana to name just a few — it has now entered our jails and prisons. This development is particularly worrisome for the **friends, family members, and loved ones of incarcerated people**, many of whom have chronic illnesses that put them at heightened risk of hospitalization or death in the event of an outbreak. But it should also be deeply concerning to the greater public, which is far more closely connected to our nation’s correctional institutions than is commonly understood.”*