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PRESS RELEASE

**CHESTER COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19
IN COUNTY AND STATE PRISONS**

During this unprecedented pandemic the Chester County District Attorney's Office has collaborated with partners in the criminal justice system to attempt to manage the spread of COVID-19 within our county and state prison systems. We have focused on balancing the safety of the community with the concern of the impact inside the prisons. As a result, the population in the Chester County Prison has been reduced by more than 30 percent since the beginning of this crisis.

District Attorney Deb Ryan stated, "The safety and protection of the community is always paramount, but we also understand the importance of compliance with the CDC recommendations during this pandemic in order to contain the spread within the prison system. Early on we carefully considered, on a case-by-case basis, how we could assist the prison and protect the community. We continue to work with our partners to assess appropriate individuals who are non-violent for possible release or furlough as we navigate this uncharted territory together."

Beginning in mid-March 2020, when it became apparent that COVID-19 would affect all aspects of the criminal justice system in Chester County, the Chester County District Attorney's Office (DAO) began working closely with the Chester County Prison (CCP), the Chester County Public Defender's Office (PD), the Chester County Adult Probation Office and Parole Department (APO), and the

Court of Common Pleas to identify and assess both pre-trial detainees and convicted defendants in our county detention facility to determine who could immediately and safely be released into the community.

In our continuing efforts to ensure the safety of the community we considered only non-violent offenders whose release would enable the prison to fully implement the best practices as dictated by the CDC and the Chester County Department of Health. To date our office, along with APO, has agreed to the release, whether by early parole or furlough, of non-violent offenders who were work-release participants, of an advanced age, with underlying health issues or compromised immunities, or pregnant. We also reviewed and agreed to the release of non-violent offenders who were close to their minimum parole date.

We continue to communicate daily with the Chester County Prison, PD's Office and APO to determine whether there are appropriate cases to be considered for release. When considering whether individuals should be released from custody, the DAO has taken a balanced and case-by-case approach. We notify victims to get their input. We also consider the nature of the offense, temporal proximity to the minimum date of release, and whether there are safe supervision alternatives to incarceration. Public safety is then weighed against the prison's need to implement necessary safety protocols. For all released individuals, APO and the PDs have worked to provide appropriate release planning, and where appropriate, mental health and substance abuse treatment upon release.

Additionally, the DAO has worked with APO and the PDs to identify those incarcerated on probation/parole violation matters that can be safely released into the community by way of stipulated violation orders. The Court of Common Pleas has permitted those orders to be presented and entered, thereby ensuring the release of numerous inmates who would otherwise have to wait until normal court operations resume and hearings can be scheduled. APO continually reviews parole applications to determine who can be safely released and considers only the most egregious and violent misconducts inside the jail to be a reason for opposition to parole.

We have requested our prosecutors to review any matter that can be handled with a time-served sentence so we can expedite those cases. These pleas are currently being handled on a regular basis before the court. In addition, we have helped develop a system to allow preliminary hearings for incarcerated inmates in a manner that conforms to social distancing requirements and other CDC mandates. This system has been operational for weeks.

Bail applications filed on behalf of inmates housed in CCP have also increased over the last two months, allowing for judicial review on a case-by-case basis of whether pretrial detainees can be safely released into the community while awaiting trial dates. We have been working in conjunction with the pre-trial services, as well as the PDs and private defense attorneys, to expedite bail reviews.

As a result of the coordinated efforts by the various criminal justice agencies and the defense bar in Chester County, the inmate population at CCP has significantly decreased. Our population on February 29, 2020 was 766. As a result of all the efforts described herein, as of today it is 524, a decrease of 242 inmates. This reduction occurred in an environment where the joint efforts of all criminal justice agencies had already reduced our prison population from recent historical levels. For example, in January of 2019, the CCP population was 863 inmates.

Within the prisons, steps are routinely taken to minimize the movement of people in and out of the facility and to enforce safety measures from within. For example, in-person visitations have been suspended except for attorney visitations, and CCP is transitioning to allow attorney visitations by video. All incoming inmates are medically monitored and quarantined for fourteen days before they are moved into the general population of the prison. All staff members, incoming detainees, and attorney visitors who enter the facilities are screened before entering.

In order to ensure the appropriate balance between the current public health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the enduring need for public safety and community protection, the determination of which inmates should be released from county detention will continue to be done on a case-by-case basis. The DAO, along with the court system, the PD, the defense bar, APO, and CCP have been working and will continue to work consistently and cooperatively to obtain a balanced approach so we can maintain safety during this pandemic.

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Approved for release:

Deborah Ryan
District Attorney