

A Joint Statement across the Walls of Two Women's Prisons

January 25, 2012

FOREWORD FROM JUSTICE NOW

Dear Justice Now Friends, Allies, Associates and Comrades:

Activists inside California's women's prisons urgently need our support in demanding an end to prison overcrowding and brutality, and the implementation of viable decarceration strategies.

On December 23, 2011 the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation announced a plan that it had covertly pushed into action months earlier—a plan to convert Valley State Prison for Women into a men's prison. Media reports failed to include information on the impact of conversion of the lives of people in California's prisons.

For months, people imprisoned in the other three women's prisons have pleaded for help to address historic overcrowding caused as they were crammed together to make room for thousands coming from Valley State. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation repeatedly announced it would adopt policies to release thousands of people from the women's prisons to alleviate suffering. These promises proved elusive.

Since the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's announcement, Justice Now received over 500 letters from people imprisoned in Valley State Prison for Women organizing to prevent the suffering, violence, and in some cases, death, they face if forced to crowd into remaining prisons. More letters were received by California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, and other groups working with people in prison.

With Justice Now's support, activists imprisoned in the two world's largest women's prisons—Valley State and the Central California Women's Facility—jointly created a statement outlining what those of us with freedom must ask for to increase the safety of those of us who are imprisoned.

Following this forward is the statement, followed by dozens of supporting quotes from people inside California's women's prisons. This statement contains the views of people inside who created it, not of Justice Now.

Please support people in prison and join the petition drive to stop the conversion and demand State accountability at: <http://www.change.org/petitions/cas-gov-brown-cdcr-secretary-matthew-cate-judge-t-henderson-stop-the-conversion-of-valley-state-prison-from-a-womens-to-a-mens-prison> .

For more information on Justice Now's solidarity campaign to stop the conversion of Valley State Prison for Women, contact Sophia Sanchez at Sophia@jnow.org. For our allies the California Coalition for Women Prisons, contact Deirdre Wilson at deirdre@womenprisoners.org.

In Solidarity,

Justice Now's Board of Directors and Staff: Allison Barahona, Madalin Bloxson, Cynthia Chandler, Cookie Concepcion, Jane Dorotik, Beverly Henry, Elizabeth Lozano, Robin Levi, Dee Mariano, Theresa Martinez, Misty Rojo, Sophia Sanchez, Amanda Scheper, Nora Wilson

LET US GO HOME: *Promises of Release Distort the Truth about Women's Prison Overcrowding*

A great deal of media attention is on California's stated plan to release some people from women's prisons and to convert one facility—Valley State Prison for Women—into a men's prison. Absent in the media coverage is the voice of those of us currently locked inside California's women's prisons.

Recent media has suggested that imprisoned women fully support the conversion into a men's prison of Valley State Prison for Women, and that conditions in California's women's prisons are improving with reduced population. These statements are false. We wish to voice our disagreement, concerns, and demands.

In this joint statement across the walls of two women's prisons, we write to say that we are opposed to the conversion of Valley State Prison for Women into a men's prison. We are joined by over 500 of our peers in Valley State Prison for Women and over 200 in Central California Women's Facility who have signed petitions or written letters imploring an end to this conversion plan.

We humbly and respectfully seek support for our following demands.

1. We demand the State immediately halt its conversion program and stop the transfer of women to the remaining overburdened women's prisons so we are not subjected to escalating abuse as direct result of historic overcrowding.
2. We demand that the State release enough people to address overcrowding of all people in its prison system.
3. We demand that when overcrowding has ceased for all people, that the State close Valley State Prison for all people and repurpose it into a non-correctional, community space.

OVERCROWDING IS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

For us, the proposed prison conversion and purposeful, escalated overcrowding of California's women's prisons system are matters of life and death.

Here at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), we recently lost our beloved, Marie Bandrup—an elder and leader amongst us. Marie died alone and imprisoned in July of cancer and liver failure after years of pleading for care went unanswered. The Supreme Court, with their decision in *Plata v. Brown*, ordered a reduction in California's prison population to prevent such medical abuse, yet relief seems elusive.

Here at Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW), we also have a well respected elder who was recently diagnosed with a life threatening condition. She asked medical staff to begin treatment and not delay until she is transferred to another prison. She was helpless when told, "What does it matter, you will either die here or die there."

This statement said to our peer reflects the value the State places on our lives. All we want is to live, the chance to be free and to be with our children. Will you hear our pleas for humanity and dignity?

SPECULATION AND MISINFORMATION IS NOT RELEASE

The claims of a reduction in the women's prison population are based on speculation and misinformation.

In reality, it has been the State's plan to turn Valley State Prison for Women into a men's prison for a decade regardless of the impact of that conversion on those of us inside women's or men's prisons. Over this time, the State has coupled its announcements that it is preparing to crowd us into fewer prisons in order to cage more men with false or misleading promises of release of thousands of people in women's prisons.

In 2006, the State announced that there were 4,000 people in women's prison who posed no risk and should be sent home—conveniently, the same number politically required to propose converting Valley State Prison for Women into a men's prison. But instead of releasing us, the State posed legislation to build 4,000 more prison beds for women, which they dressed as “gender responsive community correctional centers” as opposed to prisons. Thankfully, due to political resistance led by people in prison and budget shortfalls, only one new prison—Live Oak—was built under this plan. After some women were transferred to this locked, guarded “community correction center”, the State claimed the women's prison population decreased because fewer women were in “prison”. A locked, guarded facility that forcibly confines people is a prison, no matter what it's called. The women's prison population has not decreased—it has merely been rearranged.

This summer, the State announced it would release 3,000 women under the new “Alternative Custody Program,” allowing women with short sentences to return home to their families and children to complete their sentences. Less than 20 people have been approved for release under this program; and far fewer have actually been released. The rest of the 3000, who it was projected would meet the criteria for release, are being disqualified often for minor reasons that have nothing to do with public safety. One of us authoring this piece was denied due to a typo in her prison file and an error in her medical file. There is no due process or right to appeal. There is no timeline for re-review or a process to prevent further errors from blocking release. We hear that anyone with even the smallest medical need is being denied consideration. Some women are refusing all medications and treatments for the chance to be home with their children, to their grave detriment.

The Governor promises millions in savings in his new budget by expanding this program however, even if the State expands the program a hundred fold, fewer than 500 women will be released. The devil is in the details.

The Governor recently began a program called “Realignment” that puts counties in charge of deciding whether to jail people on short sentences. The State promises that so many women will be released through realignment that there will no longer be a need for the world's second largest women's prison (Valley State Prison for Women) and it should therefore be used to house men to comply with the Supreme Court order to curb prison overcrowding by capping the number of people locked up.

Again, we pray that this prediction of women's release is true, but we fear it will not be. The men's prison system will be impacted dramatically more by Realignment than the women's prison system, reflecting the disproportionate criminalization of men in our communities. If overcrowding of the men's prison population cannot be reduced quickly enough to alleviate overcrowding-related suffering for men, isn't it doubtful Realignment will alleviate our suffering any faster?

We implore communities to take Realignment seriously and to adopt community-based, non-custodial alternatives to imprisonment in State or county lock-ups. We also care about the conditions in men's prisons—imprisoned within them are our brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers. All we ask is that, until Realignment efforts actually deliver the promised numbers of released people, do not further overcrowd women. Do not abuse us just because you can.

Promises and projections to release thousands of women disguise the ever increasing overcrowding in women's prisons. The truth is most women are not going home. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation plans to move women out of Valley State Prison for Women and fill the institution with men as soon as possible. This

conversion requires the further crowding of two remaining women's prisons: Central California Women's Facility and California Institution for Women. The majority of us will go to, or remain in, the world's largest prison for women, Central California Women's Facility. We will not go home to our communities.

Currently, all the women's prisons are operating far above design capacity. Even as Valley State Prison for Women prepares to empty its cells, those of us housed there recently received a busload of women from Live Oak. In truth, even if Valley State Prison for Women's whole population were released tomorrow (which it will not be), we would still live in overcrowded conditions in the remaining women's prisons.

HOW MUCH HARM CAN WE SURVIVE?

With this prison conversion, the harm inflicted on us is expanding exponentially.

Conversion of Valley State Prison for Women to house men and the resulting crowding of women—including pregnant and elderly women—into facilities that are already far above capacity will intensify by horrific proportions the medical neglect already rampant in women's prisons.

The State has begun packing those of us in the remaining prisons together to make room for thousands of people from Valley State Prison for Women to be transferred in. Such cramped quarters create conditions ripe for epidemics of communicable diseases common in prisons, such as tuberculosis and MRSA. Cells at Central California Women's Facility that were designed for four women were housing eight, and now are beginning to house ten. Older women at California Institution for Women were forced to give up their lower bunks to make room, and now risk falls and injury.

There is not enough space to ensure women will not be housed with people or staff with whom they have documented safety concerns. Women are being coerced into signing waivers of liability, consenting to being housed with people who may pose them grave bodily harm. Alternatively, some women are being told they will be held in isolation indefinitely for their own protection, a measure usually undertaken only as a punishment. This poses a great risk to their mental health.

With budget cuts, most educational and vocational programs have already been eliminated from the women's prisons, taking with them most of our prisoner jobs. Now with the conversion, we face increased unemployment within the prison system, rendering us unable to buy basic toiletry and sanitary supplies.

The conversion is only just beginning and already the rapidly increasing population is overwhelming the housing yard medical services. Even before the conversion was announced, the State was laying off most psychologists and psychiatrists in the prison system and replacing them with a fewer number of social workers who will meet with us only 15 minutes every 90 days, replacing talk therapy with merely checking adherence to medication. Valley State Prison for Women was the last women's prison allowed to have a sizeable pool of peer-led support groups. Now it will be closed and the groups dismantled. Talk therapy and peer support programs are a central component to our healing process as survivors of violence, and soon we will have none.

Elimination of peer support groups also harms the local prison town community of Chowchilla, California. Here at VSPW, our threatened self-help groups have annually organized fundraisers inside the prison. Together, we rose over \$225,000 from donations and fundraisers that support local public schools in the prison town. Primarily migrant, Latino, Native American, and African American families access these schools, an ethnic breakdown that parallels our population here on the inside. The money we raise is used to ensure children have jackets and shoes. Our thinking is, if we cannot clothe or take care of our own children, we will do all we can from behind these walls to help other mothers take care of their young. We are not heartless women. Please do not take away our opportunity to try to repair harms and serve our communities.

Until now, pregnant women have been housed at Valley State Prison for Women but the conversion plan will have them transferred to the California Institution for Women in Corona, CA. Dairy farms surround this prison and the level

of pesticides and chemicals in the air is not safe for pregnant women, or anyone else for that matter. The ground water is so contaminated that it is undrinkable and people are forced to use bottled water instead however, they must still bathe in this chemically saturated, poisonous water which is dangerous for both women and their children. How does exposing unborn babies and their mothers to higher levels of environmental toxins improve our health?

The realities of the conversion plan ignore the *Plata* Court ruling's intent to reduce overcrowding and end the medical abuse we endure.

THE STATE USES MISOGYNY AND RACISM TO JUSTIFY OUR SUFFERING

We strongly feel that gender discrimination is involved in the conversion decision. It has been the plan to overcrowd women from the beginning. It is a misogynist policy decision that capitalizes on the notion that women are not as inclined to violence and that we are less likely to riot because we are desperate to go home to our families. As long as guards are safe, our safety and health is of little concern.

The women's prison population has not been reduced, merely shuffled around to dodge accountability, at our expense. This strategic decision is tolerated legally because the Court has determined that to comply with population reduction requirements, the State need only show that the population capacity is acceptable system-wide. Women's prisons are a small fraction of the California prison system. We are being crowded together because our numbers and our suffering make no statistical difference.

Does the State plan to send us home at all?

Our skepticism is supported by the failure of promises of release to pan out in reality. Most of us in women's prisons are people of color from economically depressed communities. We have no doubt that we will be disproportionately excluded from release due to this reality. Women of color disproportionately lose their parental rights because we lack family resources to care for our children when we go to prison, so if release is dependant on our ability to be primary care providers of our children, our motherhood and release are denied us. Families living in poverty rely on public housing and Section 8. People with felony records are banned from living in such housing, so our housing appears "unstable". Our community lacks financial resources to support re-entry, and now the Governor's budget proposes billions of dollars cut from social services—services that disproportionately aided people like us and our children.

And within this political landscape of illusions of release of "suitable" women, what will conditions be for the majority of us who are excluded for release and remain in women's prisons? Will brutality, inhumane conditions, and increased overcrowding be justified because we are deemed "non-good" women? This outcome echoes the racist history of masculinizing and vilifying women of color through slavery.

JOIN OUR STRUGGLE

Not only is there no rehabilitation in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, there isn't even the baseline for medical provisions that we need to survive.

Alternatives to imprisonment are effective and inexpensive. The State claims thousands can be released from women's prisons. They make empty promises we wish they would fulfill. In the meantime, our children wait.

We inside cannot vote. We cannot lobby Sacramento. How many of us will pay with our lives while we wait for relief? How many women will have nervous breakdowns? How many will die due to lack of care?

We need you to demand that the State halt its conversion program and begin a release program.

The State should focus on identifying and implementing means for reducing the prison population and ensuring savings are reinvested in education and services for our communities so we all can thrive. When the population in fact reduces and we are home, then and only then Valley State Prison for Women should be closed and repurposed. Repurposing or closing means the space can no longer be used as a prison, not a prison for the men of our communities, not a prison for anybody. Going home does not mean going to another prison or a county jail, or a locked treatment program, or a new “gender responsive” prison. Home means home.

Please join our struggle for family, health, and safety by signing our petition here:

<http://www.change.org/petitions/cas-gov-brown-cdcr-secretary-matthew-cate-judge-t-henderson-stop-the-conversion-of-valley-state-prison-from-a-womens-to-a-mens-prison> and contact your local legislators.

Michelle Cookie Concepcion, Imprisoned in the Central California Women's Facility

Kim Dodd, Imprisoned in Valley State Prison for Women

Tracy Jones, Imprisoned in Valley State Prison for Women

Lynn Noyes, Imprisoned in Valley State Prison for Women

QUOTES FROM
PEOPLE IN CALIFORNIA'S WOMEN'S PRISONS
In Support Of
A Joint Statement across the Walls of Two Women's Prisons

The health care is almost nonexistent already, so the transfer would worsen that. Also, the job availability is already sparse and would put a lot of us on waiting lists. I have completed and am currently involved in 20 self help groups. CCWF only has six. It would make our success for lifer's board requirements almost impossible if transferred. Please help us continue our current success in rehabilitation here at VSPW and keep our hopes alive.

-I. R.

Not to mention the issues of lack of sleep, lack of privacy, and lack of dignity that being housed in these common areas causes, being overcrowded breeds bullies and violence, in which case someone like me (over 50) doesn't stand a chance.

-M. E. P.

I am writing this because I feel if they move us to CIW and CCWF where there are only six self help groups, I won't get that chance to show the courts and Board how much I've changed and how much our self help groups have changed me to a better person.

-K. K.

The majority of the women are trying to recuperate from domestic violence, drug abuse, mental illness, and sexual violence, and are trying to maintain sanity from being separated from family and close friends. With overcrowding and assorted reasons for lockdowns, the “caging” of women in California's prisons will have a

negative long term effect on the women's mental and physical wellbeing. The manner in which the housing and transfers are being conducted will definitely lead to cruel and unusual treatment for the women being transferred.

-L. G.

CDCR is taking health care, lower bunks, my self help and rehabilitation, my vocational career, my means to paying my restitution and other fines, all away in one move. I do not approve nor want this move. I was not represented properly.

-T. L. G.

In VSPW there are not a lot of problems with gangs, but in CCWF they are active. I am an ex-gang member, and I am trying to change my life. I believe that if I go to CCWF I will end up back in that same lifestyle I'm trying to stay away from. Also, if they send me to CIW I will not be able to have visits with my family because it is so far away, and that won't help at all for family reunification and rehabilitation.

-S. M.

A lot of us made mistakes, but we do deserve to be treated like human beings. We do have rights and we all have a voice.

-T. C. and V. R.

I am the teacher's aide in vocational welding, and I enjoy teaching my peers. I have two years left, and I'm worried there will be no jobs available at CCWF.

-C. H.

I have been at VSPW for two years, and it has taken the prison medical facility that long to finally start my treatments. If I get moved to CCWF it will greatly affect my health if I have to start the process of medical attention all over again.

-V. J.

Women are not cattle. You can't just shove us into a barn and [expect that] we will be all right.

-R. W.

As an LWOP I do realize we are at the mercy of the CDCR but I also realize what the smallest of human dignity and treatment is and it will always will belong to me. To continuously treat us as if we are grazing cattle, needing to be relocated to another patch of grass is ludicrous.

We as inmates did not create this problem. Nor should we the women with limited living options in prison be forced to pay the high adverse price.

-S. H.

To be honest with you... how would you feel if it was one of your own family members in this situation?

-M. D.

No air to breathe, no room to grow, no way to learn how to fly. There will be nothing left but to wither away. They want to take my hopes of freedom away from me and put me into a dangerous environment.

-M. S.

We endure cruel and unusual punishment on a daily basis. The CDC system is very inhumane to female inmates. We are people too. We are not animals. You would never know the real truth about how we're being treated unless you walked in our shoes. There is a miscarriage of justice happening here at VSPW. But the staff members coupled with Sacramento want to send us to another worse off prison. WE are not OK with this decision

- D. L.

I do not wish to be stuffed into another prison like a sardine. I do not wish to be a guinea pig in CDCR's science project/experiment that will go seriously a rye."

-S. M. M.

The state doesn't want to let people out of prison. They'd rather us go over crowd inmates and let us go to war with each other! I'm one of the many that will go to SHU before I transfer to CCWF.

-M. J.

I think being crammed into one prison...its cruel and unusual punishment. Stress level goes up and medical would be limited. We would not receive proper medical care. I hope this doesn't fall o deaf ears.

-S. M. M.

I do believe they should lower the male population immediately, but not at our expense and welfare.

- D. C.

If I am transferred I will file a law suit citing sexual discrimination. Also pregnant women are at a high rate of medical complication because of cover crowding.

-J. H.

Make no mistake, people are beaten and brutalized here everyday and it is not reported, this will only increase will overcrowding. Where does the state get off and why are they allowed to break the Health and Safety Code?

-S. A.

It will cost the state of California more money than it has to retrofit this prison for men. It would also cost them to hire more guards (because men need more security than women) and this would also be costly for the state.

-E. M.

Cramming us all into one facility with limited programs options means I will not be able to meet the needs of the board members for a parole date.

-L. D.