

Dear Commissioner,

On behalf of Justice Action, our team is reaching out to you regarding the urgent need to exercise your new powers under the *COVID-19 Legislation Amendment (Emergency Measures) Act 2020* (NSW) - to release susceptible prisoners held in dangerously overcrowded conditions. The power lies in your hands to alleviate this risk, and we ask that you do so as soon as possible, before the virus enters and spreads "[like wildfire](#)" in NSW prisons.

We further highlight the pressing obligation to implement computer tablets in cells. COVID-19 is taking its toll on the mental health of all Australians, but hits particularly hard on our prisoners for whom social isolation means being completely severed from loved ones without any means of physical comfort in a personal visit, all the while under the growing threat of contracting a deadly virus in an enclosed environment. Australian prisons such as [Goulburn](#) have already witnessed riots, and many more are to follow if nothing is to be done. Tensions are simmering, families are distressed, and a lack of action risks not only civil disorder but also pertains to an irresponsible disregard for the mental health of the incarcerated. We cannot crudely simplify Australia's prisoners into a mere number, when each one of them may be a mother, a father, a son, a daughter. Prisons can be cruel places, and it is at a time like this when we must show compassion to those who need it most.

Appropriate measures must be developed and implemented to compensate for the growing disadvantages facing inmates. Although we are aware that attempts have been made to inform staff and inmates of the risk of contracting and spreading infectious diseases, these have been insufficient measures. A more immediate and practical response is essential.

CSNSW possesses at least 600 computer tablets which can ensure that face-to-face communication is partially compensated in these circumstances.

Online calls/meetings: The electronic tablets from CSNSW were to be distributed to prisoners later this year as a part of staff efficiency and prisoner responsibility initiative; the tablets should be used now to replace face-to-face communications/calls/meetings such as family and legal visits.

Mental Health support: Gaining access to online counselling from the tablets would be beneficial for the mental health of inmates under this extra stress. There is a range of safe, whitelisted online counselling services which the prisoners could access via a tablet, including services that are specific to the individual such as culture, gender and sexuality. Our colleagues from the Community Justice Coalition (CJC) have compiled a list of such services (see [p. 4-9](#)). Allowing support for these prisoners is vital to maintaining and providing for their mental health in this time of a global pandemic.

While the tablets can serve as a basic means of communication and mental health support, the hovering threat of exposure to COVID-19 would continue to affect prisoners' sense of health safety. To ensure the safety of prison staff, the standards of prisoner health safety must be upheld and the prisoners who are in the high-risk category must be made aware of and attended with extra caution.

In light of the challenges that prisoners are now facing, we believe that the least you can do is provide them with the opportunity to communicate with their families and equip them with appropriate mental health support whilst in their cells. This is also an opportunity for everyone to judge the effectiveness of having tablets in cells and to decide on the long term implementation of this strategy. This would give both the public and the prisoners themselves the chance to experience the benefits of a measure that has been long-promised.