



**Statewide
Leadership
Council**

PUTTING SYSTEM-IMPACTED
LEADERS AT THE FOREFRONT
OF THE MOVEMENT TO
TRANSFORM JUSTICE IN TEXAS

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Advocates Call for Emergency Planning in Texas Prisons Following Horrific Week
*Formerly Incarcerated People and Family Members are Joined by Legislators, Academics,
and More in Calls for Urgent Reform*

AUSTIN – After historic winter weather caused a statewide emergency and devastated power and water supplies throughout Texas, families of incarcerated individuals from across the state are demanding better emergency preparedness for Texas prisons. The horrifying conditions experienced by incarcerated individuals and prison staff during the winter storm revealed a lack of preparation by prison officials to address even the most basic needs. After collecting shocking reports from people in prison, staff, and family members, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition’s Statewide Leadership Council (SLC) is demanding urgent action by policymakers.

Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) units have previously experienced power and water outages during emergencies, including hurricanes. Last week, incarcerated individuals housed in those facilities were again left without blankets, coats, and drinking water. People in high-security wings endured sub-zero temperatures in darkness, with some people experiencing frostbite. Some unit officials rationed drinking water, providing mere ounces to people per day. People with diabetes went without insulin, and others with health care needs went without medicine or necessary supplies.

“Texans with disabilities suffered tremendously through the storm,” said **Jennifer Toon, an SLC Steering Committee member and Mental Health Peer Policy Fellow for the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities**. “Power outages threatened life-sustaining supports such as ventilators and dialysis machines, and certain disabilities impact an individual’s ability to deal with extreme cold. Imagine this population in the hands of TDCJ, unable to fend for themselves as backup generators failed, and fear setting in with the dark cold. Lack of effective emergency planning affected them the most. It was literally life and death.”

Despite ample warning of single-digit temperatures, failures throughout TDCJ were clear. “It absolutely boggles the mind how TDCJ failed to adequately prepare for the possibility of power failures and no running water. They put people’s lives in danger,” said **Savannah Eldridge, an SLC Steering Committee member, Registered Nurse, and family member of an incarcerated individual**.

In a system that has already seen dozens of COVID-19-related deaths, that lack of water also created a public health crisis. Units experienced overflowing sewage, exposing staff and incarcerated people to aerosolized fecal matter, a known cause of COVID transmission. These conditions may easily result in another spike in infections throughout units that have experienced more than 30,000 cases to date, as well as prolonged unit lockdowns.

When asked how this crisis could have been prevented, family members from across the state are clear: **The Texas Department of Criminal Justice needs better emergency preparedness**. Community leaders

are calling on the Texas Legislature to hold hearings to hear from family members and incarcerated people about the conditions they endured during the storm and which they are still facing during the COVID crisis; these conditions must be made part of the public record.

Advocates, families, and formerly incarcerated individuals are also calling for legislation requiring the creation of an emergency management advisory board to prevent future catastrophes and save lives, to be comprised of experts from the Texas Department of State Health Services, an expert in emergency management, people who have been incarcerated in Texas prisons, a family member of an incarcerated individual, and officials from TDCJ and the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles.

“When I was incarcerated, I served as a clerk. I helped my boss develop emergency plans for protecting equipment and computers during a natural disaster. Where is the planning to protect *lives* during a pandemic or natural disaster?” said **Alexa Garza, an SLC Advocacy Team member**.

Advocates urge policymakers to direct the Advisory Board to develop emergency plans that anticipate a range of emergencies, including public health crises, natural disasters, and utilities failures. The Legislature should require TDCJ and the Board of Pardons and Paroles to follow these plans when the system experiences emergencies.

“This is an important issue: ensuring all Texans are treated with dignity and respect. The events of last week underscore the importance of such legislation,” said **Representative Philip Cortez (HD 117)**, who plans on filing legislation to create better emergency planning inside of Texas’ prison system.

“While everyone in the state suffered during this winter storm, we need to remember that people who are incarcerated are not in the same position as those of us in the community,” said **Michele Deitch, an expert on prison oversight at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas**. “They can’t just put on extra layers of clothes, or take refuge with a neighbor or family member, or melt snow to flush toilets. They are completely dependent on the prison staff to meet every one of their needs. We need a disaster preparedness plan that ensures their health and safety under every conceivable emergency scenario.”

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The Statewide Leadership Council (SLC) is a coalition of system-impacted leaders from across the state who are at the forefront of the movement to transform justice in Texas. Learn more about the SLC on their [website](#).