

Protesters rally for more inmate releases during Weber jail's COVID-19 outbreak

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John Mejia of the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah speaks at a rally at the Weber Center in Ogden on Friday, July 10, 2020. Rally attendees were protesting against the Weber County Attorney's Office for not working to release more inmates from the county jail during a COVID-19 outbreak.

Sara Wolovick of the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah speaks at a rally at the Weber Center in Ogden on Friday, July 10, 2020. Rally attendees were protesting against the Weber County Attorney's Office for not working to release more inmates from the county jail during a COVID-19 outbreak.

OGDEN — Protesters urged officials Friday to release more nonviolent inmates from the Weber County Jail, which has been hit by a wave of COVID-19 infections.

A late-afternoon rally in front of the downtown Weber Center was aimed at the county attorney's office, which has influence on any early release decisions made by the courts.

"Let them out! Let them out," a crowd of 20 to 30 people chanted.

"We definitely want to ensure that inmates don't continue to spread it even further," rally organizer Malik Dayo said in an interview. "So our goal is to place pressure on the county to release inmates who are nonviolent or those nonviolent inmates awaiting trial."

The Black Lives Matter Northern Utah chapter and the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah participated in the rally, as well as a group recently formed by Dayo, El Comite Social Justice Movement. "There are a lot of social justice issues going on right now with law enforcement and corrections," Dayo said. "We are becoming bigger and more connected and united to bring the change we need."

County Attorney Chris Allred said in an interview before the rally that his office has been reviewing a list of names of inmates provided by the Sheriff's Office for possible early release because of the outbreak. In its latest COVID-19 testing report Friday, the Weber County Jail said 114 inmates have tested positive. Allred said the jail submitted about 200 inmates' names "and we have sorted through their records" to review the public safety risks presented by any of those inmates suggested for release.

"The judges have the final say, but we can inform their decisions," Allred said. "As you can imagine we have to balance things right."

He said the jail "is using as much science as they can get" in handling the outbreak. One issue, he said, is fear of releasing possibly infected inmates who may increase community spread of the disease after they are back outside.

Allred said Dayo has not asked to meet with him and he was not especially interested in seeking him out either.

He said the rally "is not a very good forum for discussion," but "we will listen to the message."

"I think what we'll find is that we're already doing what we can to balance this," Allred said. "We have taken unprecedented steps to reduce the jail population as much as possible."

But Sara Wolovick of the ACLU criticized Allred during the rally, saying he has done little since the pandemic started.

"For months we have been waiting," Wolovick said. "Getting arrested should not be a death sentence." The jail outbreak especially affects Blacks and Hispanics, she said.

She said people of color make up about 20% of Utah's population, but 43% of those behind bars.

Elizabeth Moreno said her brother, Raul, was born with one kidney and has contracted COVID-19 in the jail, putting him at risk.



He is held on a misdemeanor charge.

“They don’t believe us that he has one kidney,” she said.

Lt. Joshua Marigoni, corrections spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Office, said the agency has little control over whether inmates are released but that it would continue to work with the prosecutors and judges. Sheriff Ryan Arbon and several deputies observed the rally from inside the Weber Center. Arbon said they were there to support the exercise of freedom of speech and to protect public safety.