

The Honorable Gov. Josh Stein

Office of the Governor

20301 Mail Service Center

Raleigh, NC 27699-0301

Subject: A Call for Compassionate Reform in North Carolina's
Prisons

Dear Governor Stein,

I write to you today with a deep sense of urgency and compassion for the lives of those incarcerated in North Carolina's prisons. These men and women, despite their mistakes, are human beings deserving of dignity, humane treatment, and the opportunity to rehabilitate. Reports from inmates across the state reveal a heartbreaking reality of suffering and neglect that demands immediate action.

Incarcerated individuals across North Carolina have reported inhumane conditions, including denial of adequate medical care, physical abuse, and prolonged lockdowns that confine them indoors for months (Prison Policy Initiative, 2022 (<https://www.prisonpolicy.org>)). Many live without access to hot water, endure freezing temperatures without proper heating, and eat meals that are consistently cold, nutritionally unbalanced, and insufficient to meet basic needs (WUNC, 2025 (<https://www.wunc.org>)). These accounts reflect a systemic failure that violates the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

Such conditions also contradict the principles outlined in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a landmark document championed by Eleanor Roosevelt. Article 5 of the UDHR states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment,” while Article 25 recognizes the right to an adequate standard of living, including access to health and well-being (United Nations, 1948 (<https://www.un.org>)).

The financial exploitation of inmates and their families compounds this crisis. Commissary prices remain unreasonably high, while inmates earn wages as low as 40 cents per day—wages that have remained stagnant for decades (North Carolina Justice Center, 2022 (<https://www.ncjustice.org>)). Communication costs, including phone calls at \$0.12 per minute and electronic messages at \$0.25 per message, make it nearly impossible for families to maintain essential connections with their loved ones (Decarcerate Now NC, 2024 (<https://www.decarceratenownc.org>)). These financial burdens tear families apart and undermine rehabilitation, as studies have consistently shown that inmates who maintain strong family ties are far less likely to reoffend (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023 (<https://www.prisonpolicy.org>)). This reality violates the spirit of Article 16 of the UDHR, which upholds the right to family life and dignity.

Furthermore, the lack of access to rehabilitation programs denies inmates the tools they need to reintegrate into society.

Individualized reentry plans and education initiatives are proven to reduce recidivism, yet many of these programs remain underfunded and inaccessible (North Carolina Health News, 2022

(<https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org>)). Instead of fostering hope and opportunity, our prison system is perpetuating cycles of despair and incarceration.

These individuals are not just statistics; they are sons, daughters, parents, siblings, and friends. They are people who carry dreams of second chances and futures where they can contribute to their communities. It is our moral duty to treat them with compassion and provide them with the resources needed to rebuild their lives. Considering these systemic and statewide issues, I respectfully urge you to take action on the following:

1. Enforce humane living conditions, including but not limited to access to hot water, adequate heating and cooling, outdoor time, proper medical care, and nutritious meal options.
2. Hold facilities accountable to guarantee the prevention of abuse and neglect, ensuring oversight and transparency, and upholding basic human and constitutional rights.
3. Ensure financial fairness, regulating commissary prices, increasing inmate wages, and reducing the costs of communication services to support family connections, and enable the ability for inmates and families to harbor support and connections to better facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration into society.
4. Expand access to rehabilitation and reentry programs, substance abuse programs, continuing education programs focusing on reducing recidivism and fostering successful reintegration.

Governor Stein, the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt and her work on the UDHR reminds us of the moral imperative to uphold human dignity, even for those who have faltered. Justice should not mean

suffering; it should mean restoration. North Carolina has an opportunity to lead by example, creating a system that prioritizes compassion, fairness, and rehabilitation over punishment.

Criminal justice reform organizations such as New Hope Initiative can be a valuable asset in fostering this much needed change. New Hope Initiative is a nonprofit organization committed to addressing systemic issues in the criminal justice system. Like the concerns expressed in this letter, their mission is rooted in the belief that every person deserves dignity, humane treatment, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives. They work to transform the system by advocating for fair policies, supporting rehabilitation and reentry programs, and empowering communities to address the root causes of incarceration. Criminal justice reform organizations, such as New Hope Initiative, play a vital role in driving the systemic change our society urgently needs.

They stand ready to collaborate with state leaders and community partners to ensure that North Carolina's prisons meet basic standards of humanity and fairness. Together, we can build a justice system that reduces recidivism, restores hope, and strengthens communities.

With hope and compassion,