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RE: Written Testimony on HF3156

Dear Chair Mariani and Members of the House Public Safety Committee,

Thank you for your ongoing work to address the needs of Minnesotans during this unprecedented time. Throughout this work, the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota urges you to keep the civil liberties of those who are most vulnerable in our state, including those who are incarcerated, front and center.

The public health concerns presented by COVID-19 in confined spaces create an immediate need to ensure the health of those currently incarcerated, particularly those who are elderly and those with chronic health conditions, as well as staff in correctional facilities. Transparency around testing and facility population numbers is important, as are measures to mitigate close contact within facilities.

However, reducing the overall jail and prison population must remain the priority. The situation grows more urgent every day; since the previous informational hearing on this issue, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among inmates reported on the Department of Corrections has grown from nine to 79, now spread across three separate facilities. Staff from six facilities have also self-reported positive tests. It is important to remember that staff who move in and out of these facilities heighten the risk of COVID-19 spreading not only within facilities, but to the general public as well.

The ACLU-MN is currently engaged in litigation on this issue, but that does not negate the need for this body to take up the issue as well. Further delay only serves to exacerbate the circumstances, with possibly fatal consequences.

The ACLU-MN also supports the policy laid out in the A3 amendment, which ends driver's license suspensions for unpaid traffic tickets. At a time when many Minnesotans are facing losses of income, the inequity of further punishing those who have to choose between paying rent and paying a traffic ticket has never been clearer.

Protecting the rights and civil liberties of all Minnesotans is paramount, especially in this time of crisis.

Respectfully,

Julia Decker
Policy Director
ACLU-MN