

Duckworth, Booker Re-introduce Bill to Improve Disaster Response and Recovery Plans in Prisons

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senators Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) re-introduced legislation that would ensure prison disaster response and recovery plans protect the health, safety and civil rights of incarcerated individuals during natural disasters and public health emergencies. The legislation follows a U.S. Government Accountability Office [report](#)—which is part of Duckworth and U.S. Senator Maggie Hassan’s (D-NH) [requested](#) review of the Bureau of Prisons’ (BOP) emergency

preparedness—found shortcomings in BOP’s COVID-19 response that impacted the health and safety of those incarcerated and exacerbated staffing shortages.

“One of the many injustices exposed by this deadly pandemic is the fact that incarcerated individuals are particularly vulnerable during major disasters since they rely on staff to provide necessities and decide whether to evacuate to a safer location,” Duckworth said. “I’m re-introducing this bill today to help make sure that federal and state correctional agencies appropriately prioritize the health and safety of incarcerated individuals and staff during major disasters by better assessing damages sustained from these disasters, taking corrective actions to resolve preparedness gaps and seeking input from professionals with emergency management and health backgrounds, as well as formerly incarcerated individuals.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed alarming gaps in the response and preparedness plans currently used to safeguard the health, well-being, and dignity of incarcerated people during emergencies,” said Booker. “Our legislation will ensure Congress has the oversight to address these gaps and will help correctional facilities implement vital changes to protect the lives of incarcerated people during future natural disasters.”

The *Correctional Facility Disaster Preparedness Act* would:

- **Strengthen oversight by requiring the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to provide an annual damage assessment report** to Congress after a presidential disaster declaration or other major disaster on its effects on Federal inmates’ health and safety, as well as corrective actions to resolve preparedness gaps.
- **Expand the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) Advisory Board membership by permanently appointing three new members:** (1) a formerly incarcerated individual, (2) an emergency coordinator and (3) a public health expert with an educational and professional background working with communicable diseases to evaluate emergency preparedness and correctional policies.
- **Require the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) Advisory Board conduct a field hearing** on how correctional facilities can better incorporate considerations for incarcerated individuals in its emergency preparedness plans and recovery efforts.

“Sen. Duckworth’s Correctional Facility Disaster Preparedness Act underscores what we have been advocating for years - an emphasis on human dignity for all, including the often marginalized individuals within the prison system,” stated DeAnna Hoskins, president and CEO of JustLeadershipUSA. “The expansion of the NIC advisory board to include a formerly incarcerated individual; the mandated reporting of disaster impact;

and the prioritization of familial contact for incarcerated people to provide meaningful support, are all central to JustLeadershipUSA's #JustUS campaign. We see these not only as critical steps forward as we look at re-imagining the criminal legal system, but integral to protecting the lives of the most vulnerable. We are privileged to be working with the Senator as a partner to help shape this legislation.”

Duckworth has also been a vocal advocate for addressing predatory phone rates in the criminal justice system. In June of last year, she [introduced](#) her *Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act*, which would help families keep in touch with their incarcerated family members, which studies have shown can help reduce recidivism rates and thereby save taxpayer dollars.