House and Senate Democrats Joint Statement On The Need for Greater Transparency on COVID-19 Mitigation

PHOENIX–As elected officials it is our top concern that the lives, health and safety of all Arizonans are prioritized and protected. We have become increasingly concerned over the ongoing lack of transparency from the governor’s office and the Arizona Department of Corrections in relation to the public health dangers of COVID-19 and how it is impacting the health and well-being of staff and inmates at Arizona prisons.

On April 29th, Democratic members of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee sent a letter to Director Shinn with a number of questions and concerns. After reviewing Director Shinn’s May 5th response, we have concluded that as an elected, coequal branch of government, we need greater transparency about the Department’s comprehensive COVID-19 mitigation strategy and it appears that the Department needs to have a greater sense of urgency to address the COVID-19 pandemic across the corrections system.

As a result, the House and Senate Democrats are calling for the following actions to be taken:

1. As part of the Governor’s announced "testing blitz" provide ample ongoing diagnostic and antibody testing for staff and inmates across the Department and maintain a public and updated record of results.
2. Create and share with the public a long-term strategy for mitigating COVID-19 in the prison population and establish a system for interval diagnostic and antibody testing to protect against future outbreaks of COVID-19.
3. Work with county attorneys and the courts to release high-risk, non-violent offenders who have a year or less on their sentence and ensure that they have a safe place to go after release.
4. Allow a select group of legislators, media and AZDHS personnel to tour Florence and Perryville prisons in order to observe the Department's COVID-response procedures first-hand.
5. Release and demonstrate compliance with guidance provided by ADHS staff for prevention and response to COVID-19 in prison facilities.

While we appreciate the Director’s reply to our questions, it is critical that the information we receive be made available to the public as well. We implore you to create, and make public, all the Department’s COVID-19 response procedures, as well as providing updated information regarding testing. Increased transparency will not only provide peace of mind to the many Arizonans whose loved ones are incarcerated or employed by the Department; but provide an opportunity for analysis and improvement of those procedures.