

*Native American political
prisoner Leonard Peltier tests
positive for COVID-19*

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Orlando, January 30 (RHC)-- Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier has tested positive for COVID-19 at the Coleman Federal Correctional Complex in Florida.

"Today, Leonard tested positive for COVID," Peltier's attorney Kevin Sharp told reporters over the weekend. "We are all very concerned, as is Leonard. He wanted people to know that he sends his love and appreciation for the years everyone has fought for him."

Leonard Peltier's health has long been a concern for those seeking his release from prison for his conviction of killing two FBI agents at Oglala on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975. He is now 77-years-old and suffers from heart problems and diabetes.

Supporters believe that Peltier was wrongfully convicted in 1977 for a crime he did not commit. Imprisoned for more than 46 years, Peltier has the support of Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations. Over the years, some 50 members of Congress and others — including Judge Gerald Heaney of the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals, who sat as a member of the court in two of Peltier's appeals, have called for his immediate release.

Peltier's COVID-19 diagnosis comes just two days after the chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawai'i), sent a letter to President Joe Biden that urged the president to commute the Peltier's sentence. Schatz cites Peltier's advanced age, illness, and a loophole in current laws that unfairly disqualifies Peltier from compassionate release. While legislation led by Schatz to fix the loophole continues to be considered in Congress, that process can take years — time Peltier may not have.

"I commend your administration's commitment to righting past wrongs in our criminal justice system. In continuing that work as you consider recommendations for individuals to receive clemency, I write to urge you to grant a commutation of Leonard Peltier's sentence. Mr. Peltier meets appropriate criteria for commutation: (1) his old age and critical illness, (2) the amount of time he has already served, and (3) the unavailability of other remedies. Given these factors, Mr. Peltier should be granted a commutation of his sentence," Chairman Schatz wrote in his letter to President Biden. "Mr. Peltier has consistently maintained his innocence because the facts of his case, as well as the actions of federal agents and prosecutors involved, raise serious questions about whether he received a fair trial."

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