**Spring 2026**

**PA 388K/ Law \_\_\_\_—Prisons and the Environment**

**Prof. Michele Deitch/ Prof. Melinda Taylor**

**Course Description**

**Course Overview**

The United States incarcerates more people than any other country on earth, with more than 1.9 million people in custody on any given day. Prisons and jails are places that cause tremendous harm to the people who live and work in these settings, and it has become increasingly clear that environmental factors contribute to the risks they face. For example, incarcerated people and corrections staff are exposed to extreme temperatures, contaminated water supplies, hazardous chemicals, toxic air quality, and climate-change induced events, such as flooding, wildfires, and other natural disasters. At the same time, the carceral institutions themselves can create hazardous environmental conditions. It is no coincidence that these environmental risks disproportionately impact low-income people and people of color.

This course examines the range of environmental risks in the carceral setting by focusing on specific case studies of environmental harm suffered by incarcerated people in several instances over the last ten years. We will hear directly from people who have been incarcerated who can speak to the impact of these environmental hazards. We will examine some of the practical challenges that arise when it comes to addressing these environmental risks, such as the politics of funding infrastructure improvements, the complexities of the policy development process, and the difficulties of mass evacuations. We will explore the laws and policies in place to protect incarcerated people from environmental impacts, and the gaps in protection that exist. We will also delve into the legal obstacles people in custody face when they seek redress for the environmental harms they have suffered. And we will consider potential strategies and opportunities for advocates seeking to address these challenges.

This course, cross-listed between the LBJ School and the Law School, approaches these issues from a highly interdisciplinary and practical perspective. It will be co-taught by two professors, one with expertise on prison policy and practice and the other with expertise on environmental law. We will also have guest speakers with lived experience relevant to these issues.

**Course Requirements**

This course is dependent upon an informed and lively discussion. Students are expected to attend all classes, do all the reading, and come to class with thoughtful comments or questions about their reading assignments. The course will have a heavy reading load. Class participation is critical and will be considered in grading. There will be two short research and writing assignments and one longer research and writing assignment as the major projects for the course. Students may also be asked to help lead class discussion or to conduct some outside research on a specified week’s topic. Students may be assigned to teams to conduct some of these assignments.