

'We Are Not a Hospital': A Prison Braces for the Coronavirus

In places where social distancing is impossible and medical care strained, bars won't stop the infection's spread.



By Danielle Ivory

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Packed into a crowded federal prison complex with not enough masks, soap or hand sanitizer, and the sole doctor out sick, corrections workers in Tallahassee, Fla., were worried.

Then on Monday, a new inmate arrived and was immediately put into quarantine. And on Tuesday, a bus with almost a dozen inmates from a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center showed up.

They were scheduled for quarantine, too. And all had elevated temperatures.

"I just delivered hand sanitizer to the unit that the inmates will be housed in," said Kristan Morgan, a nurse practitioner at the prison who checked the new arrivals' temperatures. "Staff are starting to get fearful."

In jails and prisons across the country, concerns are rising of a coronavirus outbreak behind bars. Already, cases have been reported. On Friday, someone who works in a Washington State prison tested positive for the virus, and the day before, the sheriff in Hancock County, Ind., said a staff member at the local jail was being isolated at home after a positive test. On Tuesday night, New York State confirmed that an employee at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility had tested positive.

In New York City, the Department of Correction over the weekend announced its first death from the virus: David Perez, 56, an investigator who was based in the department's headquarters in Queens. Mr. Perez had not had contact with inmates for weeks, according to a person familiar with the matter.

To try to prevent an outbreak in the federal prison system that holds more than 175,000 people, the Bureau of Prisons has suspended all visits for 30 days, including most by lawyers. It has also barred transfers of inmates between facilities, with few exceptions. The bureau said the densely packed nature of prisons "creates a risk of infection and transmission for inmates and staff."

Many state prison systems and local jails, where a vast majority of imprisoned people are held, also suspended visits last week. A jail in Santa Clara County, Calif., placed inmates in quarantine after a visitor tested positive for the virus.

In other countries where the pandemic is more widespread, both prisoners and guards have fallen sick. The coronavirus swept through Chinese prisons in late February, with reports of more than 500 cases spreading across at least four facilities in three provinces. And Iran temporarily freed about 70,000 prisoners earlier this month to help curb the epidemic there.

Advocates in the United States have sounded alarms over whether correctional facilities here are adequately prepared to stop an outbreak within their walls. Much of the advice given by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — such as staying six feet away from others and routinely disinfecting surfaces — can be nearly impossible to follow behind bars.

As the outbreak continued to spread on Tuesday, public defender groups in New York City called for the release of detainees in the city jails, including on Rikers Island, who are being held on parole violations, are over 50 or have pre-existing health conditions. "The city must take basic and humane steps to prevent suffering and loss of life," said Tina Luongo, the chief criminal defender of the Legal Aid Society.

The union for the city's corrections officers countered that "instead of recklessly letting inmates out," the city should "bring in more masks, gloves, hand sanitizers and other vital supplies" for jail employees. A spokesman for the union said that corrections officers were given 3,000 masks, but they need 10,000.

More than a dozen employees of the federal prison system, including staff in New York and Texas, told The New York Times that their facilities were also ill-prepared for a coronavirus outbreak, or even a quarantine. One prison worker at a facility in Texas said that medical supplies and staff were short, even without an outbreak, and that if the prison had multiple cases, some would need to be sent to a nearby hospital for treatment.

"I can't imagine a local hospital giving inmates preference if they get to the point they have to make hard decisions on saving lives," the worker said, but added that the prison simply would not be able to handle a surge. "We don't have ventilators on hand at all. We are not a hospital. We don't have the medical staff."

In late February, Jeffrey Allen, the Bureau of Prisons' medical director, sent a memo to all clinical directors at federal prisons across the country, urging them to screen incoming inmates for the virus and to establish "baseline" supplies like gloves, surgical and N95 masks, and gowns.

In Tallahassee, the placement of new inmates directly into quarantine ramped up the concerns of staff members who were already nervous about their ability to contain an outbreak. Seven employees described the situation to The Times. Some spoke on the condition of anonymity because they feared retaliation from the Bureau of Prisons, while others are protected by their status in the prison employees' union. The bureau did not authorize them to speak.

Ray Coleman, a teacher at the prison complex, and other employees said the agency quarantined the new inmates in a unit away from the general population, but where they would still have close contact with prison employees.

Mr. Coleman said that prison officials told him on Tuesday that the bureau was planning to send more new inmates this week; they would also be placed in quarantine, he was told, likely in a special housing unit nicknamed "the SHU" that is generally reserved for inmates who get into trouble or need protection. Inmates in the unit are not usually allowed to roam freely outside of their cells, and may bathe and exercise on a limited basis.

When they do leave their cells — to shower, for example, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays — they must be closely accompanied by prison staff.

"We can't escort an inmate with a six-foot rule," said Yamira Richardson, a correctional officer who is currently working in the SHU. She worries about being exposed and then transmitting the virus to co-workers, inmates or family members.

"A lot of us are parents," said Ms. Richardson, who is also a steward in the local union. "A lot of us are caregivers to parents and elderly relatives."

Ms. Richardson and other employees said they were also concerned about staffing. If employees must stay home because they are sick, the already understaffed prison will suffer, they said.

The Bureau of Prisons declined to make Erica Strong, the prison complex's warden, available for an interview. A bureau spokesperson said there were no known cases of the coronavirus in the federal prison system but did not respond to specific questions, instead providing a statement that the suspension of inmate transfers announced last week had exceptions.

"Admission of new inmates will continue," the statement said, adding that the inmates received by the Tallahassee prison complex had been approved. "Out of an abundance of caution, these inmates were screened and placed on observation."

The statement said that an ample amount of cleaning, sanitation and medical supplies was on hand and ready to be distributed or moved to any facility as deemed necessary.

On March 13, Ms. Strong sent a memorandum to all staff members at the prison complex, assuring them that surgical and N95 masks, gloves and medical gowns would be "available at all departments."

Mr. Coleman, who is president of the prison's local union, replied in a series of memos that the gear was not widely available, and that N95 masks on back order had a projected shipping date of March 20 or later. He laid out a list of units with little or no protective gear — including the education department, the psychology department and the SHU. He noted that some areas did not have hand soap.

He said that because of a lack of supplies, the medical unit was reusing masks that are supposed to be used only once.

Ms. Morgan, the nurse practitioner who is also the vice president of the local prison union, said the complex had struggled to get basic supplies like hand sanitizer and was expecting to have to ration masks. Most of the ones on hand are either too small or too large for most prison workers, she added. "We don't know if or when we are going to get more."

No inmates at the complex have been tested for the coronavirus, Ms. Morgan said — largely because there are no tests available at the prison, and it is unclear how oral and nasal swabs would be transferred off-site for testing. Medical staff have been told that they may need to report to work after hours to screen incoming inmates in the future.

The Bureau of Prisons considers a temperature of 100.4 to be the threshold for a fever, according to its visitor screening documents. Ms. Morgan was working when the bus of ICE inmates arrived on Tuesday. She said the inmates' temperatures were in the 99.3 to 101.2 range, all of which she considered to be high.

Jan Ransom and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs contributed reporting.

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