

# The Star-Ledger

## **Coronavirus spreads in N.J. prisons as inmates and officers say state is risking their health**

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A recent inmate at New Jersey's only women's prison has tested positive for the coronavirus and everyone who was in contact with her is being quarantined, state Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks told staff Friday in a letter obtained by NJ Advance Media.

But the corrections department isn't counting her in its public statistics because she was released to Morris County before she was tested.

The letter renews questions about the spread of COVID-19 in the state's prisons, where inmates and officers have been raising the alarm about a lack of personal protective equipment, lax social distancing and the shuttling of inmates between facilities on opposite ends of New Jersey.

Statewide, the department says 41 employees and one incarcerated person at a halfway house have tested positive, but as of Thursday only 10 inmates had been tested for COVID-19 and the department was still awaiting results in seven of those cases.

The unidentified former prisoner, who was held at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Hunterdon County, showed no signs of illness during a "discharge health assessment" prior to her release, the letter said.

However, the letter does not make clear when she tested positive or how many inmates and staff members had been in contact with her. Liz Velez, a spokeswoman for the Department of Corrections, said the inmate was sent to the Morris County Jail without symptoms Monday.

In interviews this week, inmates and officers across the state prison system described conditions ripe for an outbreak, with a shortage of sanitizing products and lax policies at some prisons that still allowed inmates to play basketball and forced them to eat in close quarters.

Velez said Friday that the department was "constantly evaluating our policies (to) make any necessary changes in consultation with (state health officials) and in accordance with CDC recommendations to ensure the health and safety of our inmates and staff."

A day later, she said another inmate who is awaiting COVID-19 test results has been transferred to a "medically prescribed negative pressure room" in South Woods State Prison, where they are overseen by staff in "appropriate PPE."

The disclosures came amid mounting calls from state corrections unions and civil liberties advocates for Gov. Phil Murphy to take executive action to stem the spread of the coronavirus behind bars.

About 179 inmates are in quarantine, Velez wrote.

More than 100 officers have also been quarantined, according to Mike Gallagher, vice president of PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

According to the union, at least one officer at the Garden State Youth Correctional Facility was sneezed upon by an inmate who told him, "Haha, now you have corona, too." The alleged attack was similar to those reported by police officers during arrests around New Jersey in recent weeks.

"We don't think that the state cares about the health and safety of our correctional police officers — their lack of action is showing that," Gallagher said. "When it hits the department of corrections full force, it's going to have a devastating effect for the inmates and the officers," he said, echoing concerns voiced by groups like the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey.

In a letter Friday, the union reiterated a request that the governor stop most transfers and lock down state prisons, similar to what federal prisons already did.

At his Saturday coronavirus press briefing in Trenton, Murphy said stopping transfers was on a "long list of considerations." He also acknowledged that corrections staff, like health care workers, did not have enough personal protective gear.

Judy Persichilli, the state's health commissioner, said prisons now need to follow the same rules as nursing homes. Communal dining would ideally stop, she said. If that was not possible, inmates needed to eat six feet apart, and staff should wear masks at all times.

Velez said there "are no plans to institute a system-wide lockdown and transfers will continue to be assessed on a case-by-case basis with the health and safety of our staff and inmates in mind."

Union officials and inmates say social distancing guidelines aren't being followed consistently across New Jersey's state prisons and halfway houses.

Michael Mesi, the executive vice president of the New Jersey Superior Officers Association, which represents corrections lieutenants, said on Wednesday that corrections officials were still transferring halfway house inmates back into prisons for "minor infractions."

“They are telling us there’s no reason they shouldn’t be moving inmates around,” Mesi said. “It just makes sense to leave them at the institution they’re at, unless they’re hospitalized.”

“If it does get loose in one of these facilities,” Mesi said, referring to the transfer of inmates from the northern reaches of the state to prisons in South Jersey, “it’s going to spread like wildfire.”

Two halfway house residents told NJ Advance Media that they and others are afraid to report any potential COVID-19 symptoms out of fear that they’ll be transferred back to prison, further increasing the chance of spread.

*NJ Advance Media staff writer Brent Johnson contributed to this report.*