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First N.J. juvenile offender has the coronavirus, but only 6 have been tested

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The first offender within New Jersey's juvenile system has tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said Wednesday.

The young man lives at the New Jersey Training School in Middlesex, the Juvenile Justice Commission's largest facility. He tested positive Sunday and is being monitored in "medical isolation," according to state attorney general spokeswoman Sharon Lauchaire.

The commission oversees about 285 young men and women who committed crimes as juveniles, excluding those on parole, but it has only tested 6.

"We are extremely concerned that they are not testing all the kids," Rev. Charles Boyer, a pastor and founder of the civil rights group Salvation and Social Justice, wrote in a text message. He said he was also concerned that staff must get their own tests.

Lauchaire said University Correctional Health Care, the commission's medical provider, is following federal health guidelines by only testing those with symptoms. While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention doesn't prohibit testing people who appear well, it recommends prioritizing the sick.

Twenty employees have also tested positive, according to the commission's public statistics.

In a statement, the agency said it's "working hard to protect the health and safety of its residents." The commission previously made several changes amid the pandemic, including suspending visits, and it recently made masks available to all offenders, according to the statement.

Dozens of people have been quarantined, including seven residents with "symptoms that may be consistent with COVID-19." They are under medical supervision in isolation, Lauchaire wrote. Three who had contact with the one positive case have also been quarantined, even though they're not sick.

Sixty-seven staff have been told to quarantine at home because of possible exposure. None have had to return to work before 14 days passed, Lauchaire wrote, unlike some officers in the adult prison system who've had to break self-quarantine because of critical staffing levels.

The commission employs almost 700 staff overall, including 347 officers. William Sullivan, president of PBA Local 105, said the commission has quickly addressed the

union's concerns, including providing masks for staff and checking temperatures at entrances.

The commission has tested residents at a higher rate (about 2%) than the adult prison system (less than .7%) or the general public (1.9%).

No residents or officers have died of the coronavirus, Lauchaire said.

The number of incarcerated juveniles in the state has dropped over the past decade, which could make it easier to social distance in each facility. While some residents are teenagers, many are allowed to stay in the juvenile system into their 20s. The average age at the end of last year was 18, according to the commission's public reports.

Ten residents have also been released early by court order, Lauchaire wrote, in an effort to reduce pressure inside facilities. Prosecutors, public defenders and the Rutgers Criminal and Youth Justice Clinic continue to flag low-risk residents for possible release, she said.