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## **N.J. lawmaker calls for investigation into prison system amid coronavirus crisis**

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A South Jersey lawmaker is calling for an investigation into the prison system's handling of the coronavirus behind bars.

"The Department of Corrections has failed to protect its inmates, correction officers and the communities where the officers live with their families," state Sen. Mike Testa, R-Cumberland, said in a statement. "It is indefensible."

Testa hopes the State Commission of Investigation, an agency that investigates fraud and abuse, will lead the charge, according to a spokeswoman. An SCI representative declined comment.

Liz Velez, a corrections spokeswoman, responded that the department had adopted "sound procedures" to tackle the pandemic.

"It goes without question that the Department has placed the health, safety and security of our staff and inmate population as the #1 priority," Velez wrote in an email, citing changes prisons have already made. "We've been in communication with Senator Testa to discuss his concerns and left the door open for additional dialogue."

At least two officers and 19 inmates have died from the virus, according to the agency's public statistics. The prison system has directed officers to find their own tests, and Testa cited a recent NJ.com story about one officer and many inmates who said they were improperly denied tests as cause for concern.

In a previous interview with NJ Advance Media, Testa said his constituents rely heavily on the corrections department for jobs. His district includes two state prisons and borders another.

"It concerns me the Department of Corrections isn't taking every measure pursuant to CDC guidelines to prevent the spread," Testa said.

The senator introduced a bill (S2359) last week that would require the health department to test all first responders, including corrections officers, and he's criticized the transfers that have continued between facilities even as the virus spreads south.

"I just don't think that is wise given the incubation period of this virus to be moving people from one end of the state to the other," the senator said.

The department previously said it restricted, but did not eliminate transfers, such as when it recently moved more than 60 inmates from one Cumberland County prison to another after they formed a blockade in a quarantine unit.

*Staff writer S.P. Sullivan contributed to this report.*