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All N.J. prisoners will be tested for coronavirus beginning next week, Murphy says

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New Jersey prisons will soon begin testing thousands of corrections officers and all of the approximately 18,000 state inmates for the coronavirus, Gov. Phil Murphy said Thursday.

“Universal testing for inmates and staff is expected to start as early as the end of next week,” Murphy said at his daily coronavirus press briefing in Trenton.

Thousands of saliva tests from Rutgers University were on their way, sources told NJ Advance Media on Wednesday. Murphy thanked Rutgers and corrections officials, and he said test results would help prisons isolate positive cases.

The announcement came after officers, inmates, their families and at least one lawmaker have repeatedly raised the alarm that the state wasn’t doing enough to protect people behind bars.

The governor also said the corrections department was close to being able to offer officers exposed to COVID-19 places to stay, so they didn’t expose others.

A federal program that also promised “non-congregant shelter” was announced almost three weeks ago, but the state’s largest corrections union previously said officers who tried to isolate themselves were turned away from hotels and motels.

More than 500 officers and 150 inmates have tested positive, but the department had only tested a total of 196 inmates as of Tuesday, according to its public statistics. Twenty-nine prisoners and at least two officers have died.

Murphy has previously said New Jersey needs to expand testing before the state can re-open.