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N.J. to be first state to test every juvenile offender as coronavirus cases rise

By Blake Nelson

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All offenders and staff within New Jersey's juvenile system will be tested for the coronavirus, state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said Friday.

"We have to do everything possible here because this is such a special responsibility for us," Grewal told NJ Advance Media. "They're young people, and they're in our care."

The move makes New Jersey the first state to test every juvenile offender, according to Grewal, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and a spokesman for the Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that's tracking cases nationwide.

The state's Juvenile Justice Commission has already tested about 140 of the 282 young men and women it oversees, Grewal said, after nasal swabs arrived over the weekend. Saliva tests from Rutgers University would soon be given to the almost 700 employees, he said, and additional kits would eventually be used to test residents again.

The update came a day after Gov. Phil Murphy said mass testing for all corrections officers and inmates in the adult prison system should begin next week.

"We're thrilled that they made a decision to test," Retha Onitiri, a statewide coordinator for the Social Justice Institute, said about the juvenile system. "We're just concerned about the underlying health concerns."

While fewer young people have died in New Jersey than other age groups, a study previously found that adolescents in justice systems nationwide tended to have more health problems, which could increase their risk.

The institute previously asked the state to release all youth with asthma, diabetes or other chronic illnesses.

Eleven residents were set free early by the courts after the commission flagged them for possible release, Grewal said, but he added that it was difficult to release more because reforms over the past decade had already whittled the overall population down to more serious offenders. (The commission's 2011 population was more than double what it is today.)

New Jersey's first juvenile offender tested positive almost two weeks ago. At least 20 residents have tested positive since, according to the agency's public statistics. All live at the New Jersey Training School in Middlesex, also known as Jamesburg, the commission's largest facility.

Jamesburg also has 14 staff with COVID-19.

An additional 18 employees at the Juvenile Medium Security Facility, in Bordentown, and throughout residential community homes have tested positive. The Female Secure Care and Intake Facility, also in Bordentown, has no reported cases.

None have died, officials said.

About 30 residents and 33 staff remain quarantined, a Grewal spokeswoman said, either because they tested positive or had possibly been exposed. Quarantined Jamesburg residents had their own rooms with private bathrooms, Grewal said.

Starting in March, the commission made several changes to head off an outbreak, including suspending visits. Residents were continuing their education remotely, Grewal said, and the commission had distributed individual DVD players and video games. Phone calls were also increased, he said, and court fines suspended.

In juvenile systems nationwide, 196 youth and 332 staff had tested positive as of Friday, according to the Sentencing Project.