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Coronavirus has killed dozens in state prisons. How N.J. failed to stop it.

By S.P. Sullivan, Blake Nelson and Joe Atmonavage

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The day after New Jersey lowered its flags to honor coronavirus victims in early April, a grandmother died in Belleville. She was a nurse at Northern State Prison.

Two weeks later, a pregnant woman from Bridgewater drove her husband, gasping for air, to the emergency room. He is an officer at East Jersey State Prison in Avenel and remains on oxygen.

Three days after that, a man who had made it more than a year-and-a-half as an inmate took his last breath at a Trenton hospital. He was a former Bloomfield councilman, awaiting possible release in July from a halfway house.

From the start of the pandemic through today, 42 inmates and at least 3 people who worked in state prisons have died with the coronavirus, leaving New Jersey with the highest rate of inmate deaths in the country. The death toll likely is higher still because of inconsistent testing and deaths not officially attributed to the pandemic.

All the while, Gov. Phil Murphy has lauded his administration's handling of the crisis, saying they have done all they can to separate prisoners, protect staff and maintain public safety during the unprecedented pandemic.

"That doesn't mean that we bat a thousand every day," the governor said at an April briefing. "It doesn't mean we can't do better. And it doesn't mean we don't care."

An NJ Advance Media investigation for NJ.com of New Jersey's response to the spread of the coronavirus in its 26 state prisons and halfway houses found a spiraling death rate and jarring inconsistencies between what authorities said was happening and what inmates, officers and civilian staff witnessed on the ground.

Since the pandemic began, Garden State prisoners have died at a rate of 21 people for every 10,000, according to an analysis of national data compiled by The Marshall Project, a nonpartisan news organization that covers the criminal justice system. That's double the rate of the rest of the state.

The picture is even worse when you compare the prisoner death rate to neighboring New York, where the prison population is more than double the size of New Jersey's. They've reported more than twice as many confirmed cases in prisons, but they only have 15 inmate deaths, a little more than a third of New Jersey's total.

How could so many die so quickly?

As the virus spread and Gov. Murphy ordered all New Jerseyans to shelter in place, prison officials continued to shuttle inmates between northern prisons, where the virus was prevalent, to southern ones, a region that at the time had few or no cases.

They packed quarantined prisoners in buses and stacked them in bunk beds inside trailers, not knowing whether they were infected. At least one group of quarantined prisoners formed a blockade to protest conditions.

Executive actions from Murphy, notably temporary releases and in-house testing, took weeks to start and longer to implement. Even frequent allies of the governor like civil liberties advocates and the state public defender now accuse his administration of stonewalling and inaction.

Exposed officers who tried to isolate themselves were denied access to hotels and motels, their union said, in the weeks after a program was announced that was supposed to house first responders.

Prisoners complained social distancing policies were being ignored altogether. Some administrators even allowed inmates to play basketball during recreation time in early April.

State officials waited five weeks after Murphy declared a public health emergency before they allowed inmates to wear masks. New Jersey similarly refused to lift restrictions that designated hand sanitizer a form of contraband until, under pressure from advocates, it relented.

And if prisoners died before they were tested for the coronavirus, it was up to state and county medical examiners to decide whether to test them. Multiple families of dead inmates said they were still waiting for an official cause of death.

Taken together, the findings of the investigation reveal a system that repeatedly failed to protect inmates and staffers, and do what the governor and prison officials claimed.

Corrections officials maintain their “highest priority is the health of its inmates and staff as we deal with this unprecedented public health crisis,” a spokeswoman said.

A dozen experts on prison policy said New Jersey’s response was concerning, but some also said the state was part of a national failure to manage prison populations during the pandemic.

“It looks to me like it’s going horribly,” said Sara Wakefield, an associate professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University, when presented with the investigation’s findings. “I would say it’s going horribly in most states.”

Aside from Murphy and Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks, none of the more than 40 people interviewed by NJ Advance Media — including more than two dozen prisoners

and family members of inmates and nine people currently working in prisons and in criminal justice — said New Jersey was managing the crisis in its prisons well.

Many inmates and staff spoke on the condition of anonymity, fearing reprisal or citing prison policies against employees speaking directly with the media. But some spoke on the record, saying official accounts of how the prison system responded to the coronavirus didn't square with what was going on behind bars.

“They are sweeping this under the rug,” Miska Diggs, an inmate at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Hunterdon County, who is serving a sentence for drug charges, said in early April. “It is hush-hush. They don't even say ‘COVID-19.’ I don't think they can even say the word. It's absolutely negligence.”

“We knew what we were getting into when we took this job,” said one officer at South Woods State Prison in Bridgeton, “but we expected to be taken care of.”

‘LIKE WILDFIRE’

The deadly disease has infiltrated every prison in the state.

Michelle Lodzinski got it as she was awaiting a Supreme Court appeal of her conviction for the 1991 murder of her son, Timothy Wiltsey, one of the most infamous cases in recent state history. Her attorney said she spent nearly a week in the hospital after going in and out of consciousness, later testing positive for the coronavirus and double pneumonia. She is now back in prison.

The family of Elias Chalet, the former Bloomfield councilman convicted of bribery, believes he got the virus in a state halfway house. He died less than three months before his scheduled release.

“He died alone,” his attorney said.

The disease has infected and killed murderers and low-level offenders, prison medical staff and sworn corrections officers alike.

Nelson Perdomo, a 19-year veteran corrections officer who worked at East Jersey State Prison, died April 9.

Maria Gibbs, another 19-year veteran who worked at the Central Reception and Assignment Facility in Trenton, succumbed to the virus April 22.

It will kill more before this is over.

“Once it's in the facility, you know it spreads like wildfire,” said Christine Tartaro, a criminal justice professor at Stockton University.

Prisons are hardly cut off from the world, she said, and the spread of a deadly virus is more than a humanitarian crisis.

It is a public health threat.

Officers and staff come and go every day. They go grocery shopping in the afternoon. They hug their children at night.

Anything they pick up inside, they bring out.

‘ASTRONOMICAL’ INFECTION NUMBERS

New Jersey has been a leader in criminal justice reform the past few decades, reducing its prison population by steering people accused of crimes to drug court or keeping them out of jail entirely through bail reform.

But its prisons are old, crowded and ill-prepared to deal with a pandemic, experts say.

Only Michigan, Ohio and the federal prison system have reported more overall deaths linked to coronavirus, but their inmate populations are at least double New Jersey’s.

“Those numbers are astronomical,” Sandra Langston, a former Rikers Island warden who now works as a nurse in New York City, said about infections. “You’re creating a human petri dish.”

State authorities insist they have it under control.

Hicks said in an April 16 interview his department was working “as expeditiously as possible” to implement an executive order from Murphy allowing for the release of some prisoners.

“We all recognize that we are in a pandemic and time is of the essence,” he said.

Hicks also denied claims sick prisoners weren’t getting treatment.

“People that are in our custodial setting have access to medical care,” he said, responding to complaints compiled by NJ Advance Media from dozens of inmates and their families.

“That’s just a fact.”

Inmates, officers and public health experts all said they were skeptical of claims that every inmate showing symptoms would get the care they need even before the pandemic.

“Places of incarceration have had shortcomings in health care for a very long time,” said Langston, the former Rikers warden. “A very long time.”

Hicks told NJ Advance Media it was “100 percent accurate” to say anyone showing “flu-like symptoms” would get treatment in a prison system with a \$1 billion annual budget.

But at least a dozen inmates or family members of inmates told NJ Advance Media they were denied treatment despite persistent coughing, chills, shortness of breath and even loss of taste and smell — all telltale signs of the virus.

Those who did get treatment said it consisted of allergy and cold remedies like Zyrtec, Tylenol and Tamiflu.

One female prisoner at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women said she was placed in isolation after she fell extremely ill. The prison, she said, gave her medication — for a urinary tract infection she didn’t have.

Another inmate at Mid-State Correctional Facility in Wrightstown said he had chills, achiness and lost his sense of smell and taste but was denied testing in early April.

He was so desperate to find out if he had the virus, he asked a reporter whether he could mail his saliva out of the prison to get it tested.

‘LACK OF URGENCY’

Murphy’s administration has announced bold steps to curb the spread in prisons but failed to deliver, experts say.

The Garden State was among the first states in the U.S. to enact plans to temporarily release sick and elderly inmates who don’t present a public risk until the pandemic is over.

But it took 17 days after Murphy’s announcement until the first inmate walked out.

Twenty-four prisoners died over that period.

It’s unclear if any of the dead would have qualified for release because corrections officials will not make lists of eligible inmates public.

As of Friday, the corrections department said only about 100 of more than 3,000 potentially eligible prisoners had been released by the commissioner under Murphy’s executive order. (Hundreds more have been paroled and the governor’s office said, as of Wednesday, the total number released was 562.)

The delays prompted State Public Defender Joseph Krakora and the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey to write to the state Supreme Court, accusing corrections officials and the state Parole Board of acting with “a lack of urgency” in a Friday letter to Chief Justice Stuart Rabner.

The high court agreed on Monday to hear arguments about whether state officials should be ordered to speed up the process and disclose more information. Rabner ordered the state to respond to the claims by May 19.

New Jersey recently began an ambitious plan in partnership with Rutgers University to perform saliva tests on all its approximately 18,000 prisoners and thousands of employees.

The announcement was a reversal after weeks of maintaining it wasn't feasible to test every inmate who complained and denying a request from corrections unions to open a testing center for staff.

They have their work cut out for them.

As of May 12, only 460 inmates had received completed tests — 396 of whom had the virus, according to the Department of Corrections.

The World Health Organization says a positive rate of about 10% is a good indication that enough testing is being done to slow the spread of the virus.

At least 86% of tested inmates were infected.

OFFICERS AND STAFF IN HARM'S WAY

The corrections officer at South Woods State Prison stood outside his home, scared of what he might bring inside.

"I basically have to strip in my driveway and sanitize everything before I can even walk in my house," he told NJ Advance Media in early April.

The officer, who requested anonymity because he wasn't allowed to discuss prison operations publicly, said the state wasn't providing him or his colleagues enough protective gear or medical care.

"If these older inmates are getting it, they're gonna die," the officer worried, especially because the prison wasn't prepared to handle constant hospital trips.

"This is gonna get bad," he said.

It got bad.

In the weeks since COVID-19 arrived in New Jersey, at least 595 state corrections employees have contracted the virus. That's nearly identical to the 598 cases documented at the beginning of the month within every other law enforcement agency in the state combined — a group of employees more than three times the size.

David Greaux, an officer at East Jersey State Prison, knew what he was getting into, and he took precautions.

He showered after work. He slept in a different room from his pregnant wife.

The couple hoped for an Easter birth, so they could name their newborn daughter "Sunday."

The day before Easter, Greaux told his wife he felt hot. Silvanna Greaux, a nurse, took his temperature. One hundred degrees, according to her notes.

David Greaux tested positive April 13, according to medical records. His wife tested positive three days later.

Silvanna Greaux drove her husband, gasping for air, to the Robert Wood Johnson emergency room in New Brunswick on his 41st birthday.

She was more than 40 weeks pregnant. She did not hug him goodbye.

An ER doctor called her within an hour. David Greaux needed oxygen, and "it does not look optimistic," Silvanna Greaux recalled being told.

She gave birth without her husband a week later. Discharge paperwork told her to stay away from her newborn as much as possible because she had the virus.

David Greaux spent almost three weeks in the hospital and remains on oxygen at home. He has not yet held his daughter, Hannah Sunday Greaux.

"Officers are risking their lives," Silvanna Greaux said of her husband. "And I worry for his co-workers."

Nurses in adult prisons are also worried. Three told NJ Advance Media they were not given enough protective gear and received pushback from superiors when they asked for more.

"My boss demanded that I go to a unit unprotected to take care of patients with COVID-19," one Northern State Prison nurse said. "She could care less if I died."

The nurses union, Health Professionals and Allied Employees, filed a workplace complaint against Rutgers University Correctional Health Care, which provides medical care in the state's adult and juvenile systems.

They claim health care staff are working in "horrific conditions" that pose an "imminent hazard" to their health and said those conditions contributed to the death of Susan Cicala, the nurse at Northern State Prison.

“Although management has claimed to take measures to protect employees from COVID-19,” the union wrote, “those measures have been poorly implemented or lacking.”

A Rutgers spokesman declined to comment on the complaint or specific allegations from the nurses, but wrote in an email that “we are proud of our work” and “have followed state and federal guidelines from the Department of Health and the CDC to ensure the health and safety of our staff and their patients.”

THE BLOCKADE

The 63 inmates had one thing in common: They came into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19.

But instead of testing them, state authorities put them in makeshift quarantine, stacked atop one another in bunk beds inside a trailer-style building at Southern State Correctional Facility in Cumberland County.

“It was dirty, no cold water to drink or nothing,” one prisoner wrote to his family.

Some prisoners were worried about getting sick from the prison staff. Others were frustrated by how many inmates they packed in the unit, so some of them barricaded a main door in an act of protest late on April 9.

NJ Advance Media spoke with two corrections sources with direct knowledge of the incident and obtained four written accounts of the ordeal that prisoners sent their families.

Liz Velez, a corrections spokeswoman, described it as “a prolonged disturbance” and said nobody was injured. She did not respond to additional questions seeking to confirm accounts of inmates and staff.

“A couple dudes decided that they were putting too many inmates in the little ass unit,” a second prisoner wrote to his mother, “so they put a table in front of the entrance door to our side.”

Around 3 a.m., corrections officials loaded the inmates onto a bus and transported them to nearby South Woods State Prison in Bridgeton. One officer said the staff at South Woods was alarmed because the facility, which had so far seen few confirmed coronavirus cases, was now getting a busload of quarantined inmates in the dark of night.

Although inmates said the blockade was an act of just a few, all 63 of them were charged with “encouraging others to incite a riot,” according to inmates and a copy of a disciplinary report obtained by NJ Advance Media.

One prisoner wrote to his family that they couldn’t bring any of their belongings and, once placed in isolation, were forced to take medication without being told what it was.

“We starving, cold, no sheets,” he wrote. “Every time they give me pills I feel funny.”

BROKEN QUARANTINES

The inmates from the blockade were among 156 transfers from one facility to another that month, according to the department.

The state also transferred more than 300 inmates the month before, drawing harsh criticism from Republican state Sen. Mike Testa, whose Cumberland County district includes many corrections employees.

“The Department of Corrections has failed to protect its inmates, correction officers and the communities where the officers live with their families,” Testa said.

(Transfers are down from the same period last year, and a corrections spokesman said movement for “medical care and security reasons” is still allowed.)

Corrections unions, too, have criticized the administration since the early days of the pandemic.

Under department policies, staff members who come into contact with someone who tests positive were supposed to self-quarantine at home for two weeks.

In a letter obtained by NJ Advance Media, the head of the union representing the prison system’s internal affairs investigators said that one of his members did alert his supervisors soon after he tested positive in late March.

But his co-workers at East Jersey State Prison were ordered back to the office just days later, according to FOP Lodge 174 President Adrian Ellison.

NJ Advance Media asked the department about the matter and, days after the coronavirus test, a spokeswoman denied the officer had been confirmed positive.

Yet that same day, according to Ellison, the department quarantined the office. It’s unclear what changed.

Ellison said in an interview that administration officials were purely waiting for health officials to officially log the test result in a computer system.

“The DOC doctors should not be waiting for the results to be logged” before enforcing quarantines, Ellison wrote in his letter.

Hundreds of other employees were also ordered to break self-quarantine because of “critical” staffing levels, according to the department.

‘THEY DON’T CARE IF WE DIE’

William Sullivan, the president of PBA 105, the state’s largest corrections union, which represents almost 5,500 officers, said that although he has disagreed with the department’s handling of the crisis, he laid the blame on political meddling from above.

“I’m sending all these requests to the department, and all the responses are, ‘It’s being sent to the governor’s office,’” Sullivan said in an interview.

“I honestly think the department has tried to do a good job and they’ve been stifled by the governor’s office.”

Spokespeople for the governor did not respond to a message seeking comment on the claim.

Testa, the Republican state senator, has called for a formal probe of the state’s handling of the pandemic behind bars — saying the State Commission of Investigation should conduct an inquiry.

Any probe will come too late for the family of Ricky James, who died at Mid-State on April 3 — days before corrections officials confirmed their first case.

“They don’t care if we die,” James told his mother just days earlier, complaining of flu-like symptoms.

Fellow prisoners said James awoke just after midnight complaining he was dizzy and could barely breathe. They said he slumped over in his cot.

New Jersey corrections officials told NJ Advance Media there was “no indication that Mr. James reported COVID-19 related symptoms.”

Ten days later, another inmate on the same tier, Frank Silvera, died with the coronavirus.

James was one of 36 inmates who died in April. Even if you subtract the 31 known to have the virus, the remaining five deaths make last month the deadliest April in years, according to state data.

It’s not surprising that New Jersey’s prison death rate is so high, because of how densely packed and hard-hit the state is overall, said Todd Clear, a criminal justice professor at Rutgers University.

“It’s a little surprising that we’ve been so unresponsive,” he said, especially when it came to releasing people.

“We understand families are anxious to have their loved ones home,” said Velez, the corrections spokeswoman, “but the process is moving as intended and includes individualized assessments, in-person home investigations, notification of victims and prosecutors, COVID-19 testing among other steps to ensure safety for all.”

Inmates who are released must agree to a set of terms to temporarily stay in their homes, including swearing off alcohol and checking in twice a day.

About a 10th of the 99 inmates released by Friday had violated a rule, Velez said.

They were sent back to prison.