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N.J. prisoners will have access to the COVID shot early. Corrections officer vaccinations have already begun.

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New Jersey prisoners and officers will be part of the first wave of coronavirus vaccinations, the head of the state health department said Wednesday during a virtual press conference.

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli said that while prisoners would not be able to receive vaccines through a partnership with pharmacies that is helping nursing homes, she was working with corrections officials on other options.

“We know that our prison population is a very vulnerable community,” Gov. Phil Murphy said.

New Jersey’s vaccination plan is broken into phases. Several groups qualify for the first part, Phase 1A, including “correctional facilities, prisons, juvenile centers” and jails.

Health care workers remain the highest priority, followed by the tens of thousands of people who live and work in nursing homes and other long-term health facilities. Prisons would be next in line, along with group homes, federal housing for seniors, the state’s five developmental centers and other facilities, according to the health department.

A prison spokesman did not immediately respond to a question about how quickly prisoners would have access to shots, but staff vaccinations have begun.

About 100 officers have already been vaccinated, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state’s largest corrections union.

Nobody will be forced to get a vaccine, corrections spokeswoman Liz Velez said earlier this month.

“The Department will continue to follow guidance from public health experts in order to protect the health and safety of staff and incarcerated individuals,” Velez wrote in an email.

Some experts argue that vaccinating prisoners is important for protecting public health overall.

“These are hot spots for COVID,” said Nathan Link, a criminologist and assistant professor at Rutgers University in Camden. Prisoners are constantly being released, he said, especially into poorer neighborhoods already hit hard by the pandemic.

“We will just continually have this slow trickle of COVID into the community if we don’t address it,” he added.

Dozens of New Jersey prisoners and several staff died in the first months of the crisis, giving the state the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation. Cases subsided during the summer, but numbers are rising again.

Since the newest round of testing began late August, at least 680 prisoners and more than 600 staff have tested positive, according to state data.

The increase has been especially pronounced at South Woods State Prison, and family members and loved ones of inmates at the Bridgeton facility recently told NJ Advance Media they were terrified by what they believed was a lack of social distancing and adequate health care behind bars.

“They’re still cramming people in a room,” Christopher Melendez, a South Woods prisoner, said during a phone interview Dec. 9. He’d recently tested positive, but he and other prisoners lacked adequate cleaning supplies, Melendez said.

About 123 South Woods prisoners were quarantined mid-December, Velez wrote in an email. About 17 staff members and ten prisoners were positive as of Dec. 17, she said.

There are far fewer prisoners in the state than nursing home residents. Last month, New Jersey had about 13,600 prisoners and nearly 5,500 officers overall, in addition to supervisors and nearly 300 nurses.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Matt Arco contributed to this report.