

After COVID-19 cases spike in Tucson prison unit, advocates demand action to spare inmates

Helen Wieffering - Arizona Republic - Updated August 6, 2020

The day after officials announced that hundreds of inmates in a Tucson state prison are infected with COVID-19, advocates slammed Arizona's response to protecting the health of incarcerated people and called for an immediate stop to prison admissions.



The state announced Tuesday that 517 people, or nearly half of the prison

population at Tucson's Whetstone Unit, tested positive for the disease. The Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry previously reported less than 900 cases at prisons statewide, and has tested about 21% of all inmates as of Tuesday.

"Most people in Arizona are not sentenced to prison to die," said Joe Watson, a formerly incarcerated person and spokesman for the American Friends Service Committee of Arizona.

"And yet, by being so careless with these lives, that's exactly what [prison officials] are doing," he said.

AFSC, which researches and lobbies for reforms to the criminal justice system, released a statement Wednesday demanding action to stop the outbreak. The group called on officials to halt prison admissions until the new virus is contained and release to home confinement inmates who are immunocompromised, pregnant, or nearing the end of their sentence. The group has made similar demands since April.

The Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry said the hundreds of positive results came after a two-day effort to test all 1,066 inmates at Whetstone Unit. It was one step in a statewide plan to test the entire prison population, according to spokesman Bill Lamoreaux. The Arizona Department of Health Services said in June that Arizona would test all inmates but did not offer a timeline.

Lamoreaux said the department also tested all 1,541 inmates at the Safford prison, where results showed only seven positive COVID-19 cases. Inmates at the Douglas prison had also been tested but results were pending.

Twenty-one inmates in Arizona are believed to have died from COVID-19, according to the agency's [data dashboard](#). Three deaths were confirmed and another five were suspected at the Tucson prison, where Whetstone is one of nine units that house a total of 4,709 people.

'A powder keg inside of our prison system'

Advocates said the state had not acted quickly enough to contain the spread of the new coronavirus in places where close quarters and bunk-style dormitories make social distancing next to impossible.

The Valley Interfaith Project and the Arizona Interfaith Network said in a statement on Wednesday that department director David Shinn recently "outlined a plan to test each inmate at every facility, testing 3,000 inmates a week, finally concluding in October." No such plan has been publicly announced.

"Your current testing plan for the state's prisons, which just commenced, is too drawn

out," Valley Interfaith Project leaders said in a letter to Shinn on Wednesday. "The rapid spread of the virus and the still ongoing unevenness of response by your Department will lead to more loss of life without drastic and immediate interventions."

"This pandemic had the potential to be a powder keg inside of our prison system," he said, but he said "there's no urgency" to offer solutions.

As schools, gyms and other gathering places closed, prison inmates waited weeks to be supplied face masks and protective gear.

Officials announced in mid June that prison staff would be required to wear masks at work, and by early July the department said all inmates were provided fabric face coverings.

"Our elected officials here have had this kind of mentality that the individuals inside of prisons are not humans," Rushdan said. He served 15 years in prison before his conviction was overturned, according to the ACLU.

The ACLU is one of the organizations that sued the Arizona Department of



Khalil Rushdan, an organizer for the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona, said he recognized early on how COVID-19 would endanger incarcerated people.

Corrections in 2012 over the poor quality of health care in prisons, and as of last winter the settlement was still being negotiated.

Both Watson and Rushdan said they expected to see COVID-19 cases rise in prison facilities as the state makes testing more available.

Testing comes less than two weeks after inmates stage walkout

Watson said he believes the tests at the Whetstone Unit were only offered because inmates staged a peaceful protest about their concerns about COVID-19 about two weeks ago. He said he heard about plans for a mass walkout from family members and associates at the Tucson prison last month.

According to the department, inmates walked out to the prison yard on the evening of July 23 demanding to be served meals in their dorm housing. The protest ended peacefully, and the next day officials modified operations to deliver meals, Lamoreaux said. He called it a "minor issue."

To Watson, the protest put necessary pressure on the department to act. He served the last 18 months of his prison sentence in the Whetstone Unit and said, as a minimum security yard, it should have been one of the first places officials looked to implement early release and social distancing.

"It would not surprise me at all if the only reason that there was mass testing at Whetstone is because of that protest," he said.

Everyone in a prison setting is vulnerable to the virus, Rushdan said, including staff, maintenance workers and inmates. He's concerned the state is willing to play a "numbers game" with COVID-19 and downplay the impact of the disease.

Of the more than 400 inmates who the department reports have recovered from COVID-19, he wonders, "Are these individuals suffering?"

"That's the part they're not being transparent about ... The testing piece is just one element of it," Rushdan said.

Reach the reporter at Helen.Wieffering@arizonarepublic.com or on Twitter [@helenwieffering](https://twitter.com/helenwieffering).