

Tucson prison inmates say close conditions, slow test results spread COVID-19

Arizona faith-based group asks department of corrections to mitigate virus spread

Stephanie Casanova ~ August 31, 2020

Ruben Silva, an inmate at the state prison in Tucson, asked for medical attention days before his COVID-19 test came back positive, he told his sister.

His temperature was not high, so nurses told him he did not have coronavirus symptoms and dismissed his concerns, he told his sister, Nanette Scolli, in emails.

On July 30, his COVID-19 test came back positive, and he was taken to a pod where all COVID-positive inmates were being housed.

Silva is one of 517 inmates in the Whetstone unit in the prison complex who tested positive for the virus after the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry started testing all prison inmates. The department reported the outbreak Aug. 4 and said the test results came in over several days.

A late-July spike in Pima County COVID-19 cases shown on the Arizona Department of Health COVID-19 webpage reflects most of those cases. July 30 shows 642 cases, the highest number of cases by far that month.

Silva told his sister that he and other inmates spent more than five days showing symptoms and waiting for test results while living in close quarters with inmates



*There have been 883 COVID-19 cases and five deaths at the state prison in Tucson, 10000 S. Wilmot Road.
Kelly Presnell / Arizona Daily Star*

who tested negative. Some of the inmates who tested negative have since started to have symptoms, another prisoner said.

With testing expected to be completed in September, the Arizona Department of Corrections has not said whether it plans to retest any inmates unless they're showing symptoms.

“The testing allows us to identify asymptomatic spread and isolate and cohort inmates as needed in order to mitigate COVID-19 spread within our congregate setting,” Bill Lamoreaux, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Corrections, said in an email.

There have been 883 COVID-19 cases in the Tucson prison and five coronavirus deaths, the highest in any prison in the state.

The prison complex in Tucson houses more than 4,700 inmates, including 1,032 in the Whetstone unit. In the Tucson prison, 4,372 inmates have been tested, with 3,292 testing negative for the virus. The department is waiting on results for 197 tests, and 63 inmates have recovered.

After the Arizona Daily Star reported that the **Whetstone Unit in Tucson had more than 500 positive coronavirus cases** earlier this month, several family members and friends of prisoners shared copies of emails from inmates concerned about further spread of the virus.

“Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has taken significant actions to mitigate the risk and impacts of COVID-19 in its facilities,” Lamoreaux said. “Keeping our staff, inmates and communities safe continues to be our top priority.”

“THEY CAN’T HANDLE THIS OUTBREAK”

In emails shared with the Star, Tucson inmates told their family their health needs are being ignored until they become gravely ill. They said they are going days without a shower or clean clothes.

In one email, an inmate said he had just returned from his job in the prison when he got his test results. He was told he tested negative, then positive, then negative again and was moved back and forth between housing with sick inmates and housing with COVID-negative inmates.

“I don’t even know what to do or say at this point anymore, but I told them I’m not moving,” wrote the inmate, whose friend asked not to be named for fear of retaliation. “I mentally can’t deal with yet settling into another house and know I’m spreading COVID.”

He says staff threatened to take him to “the hole,” or isolation, if he didn’t comply. The inmate eventually complied but said he was moved back to the pod with sick inmates after they determined his results were ultimately positive.

On July 30, Silva told his sister he had been sick for a while. He said inmates live between 1 and 3 feet apart, and several share a small room.

“They can’t handle this outbreak by moving people around with week-old information as to who’s sick and who’s not,” he told Scolli.

Lamoreaux said movements happen on a case-by-case basis. New inmates are tested at the state prison in Phoenix where the department receives transfers from county jails. The inmates are monitored for 14 days before being moved to a prison within the system, Lamoreaux said.

“SO SCARED,” “CAN’T BREATHE”

On July 2, Barbara Hudson died in the San Carlos Unit in Perryville Women’s Prison in Goodyear. Before her death, she sought medical care for shortness of breath and chest pain, said Kim Crecca, convenor of the Diocesan Prison Ministry, who has volunteered at Perryville and communicates often with prisoners.

“Medical dismissed her concerns without testing her for COVID,” Crecca said. “I have several eyewitness reports that were with her when she passed away, stating that her last words were, ‘So scared,’ and ‘Can’t breathe.’”

The Department of Corrections' COVID-19 data dashboard shows zero deaths due to COVID-19 in the Perryville Prison.

Crecca said she is skeptical of the number of inmate deaths due to COVID-19 as the Department of Corrections has been reluctant to share information about how they determine whether to investigate a death as COVID-19 related.

Crecca is part of the **Arizona Interfaith Network**, a group of faith-based leaders across the state that organizes people for social and economic improvement.

“We feel that her death is a rallying cry, not only to help with the release of inmates as possible but also about the underlying conditions there that make them really vulnerable to the virus,” Crecca said.

IGNORING EARLY SIGNS OF VIRUS

After being moved to a housing area for coronavirus-positive inmates, Silva's symptoms got worse, and he was taken to isolation. He had fluid in his lungs, was on an oxygen machine on and off for at least three days and suffered from body aches, he told his sister. He said he went days without a shower or clean clothes.

“I'm not anybody special here, but I'm not a nobody either,” he told his sister.

While in isolation, Silva said he had to pull strings to be able to send an email, and that he didn't have soap, a toothbrush or toothpaste.

“I did nothing to deserve this punishment,” he said.

Scolli recently went almost three days without hearing from her brother. When she reached a corrections officer, she was told her brother had been taken to a hospital because he had a stroke.

He was back in prison and feeling better a few days later, she said on Aug. 19.

Silva said another inmate was feeling sick but got no medical attention until he had a fever of 104 degrees and was taken to the hospital.

A longtime friend of Scolli's who is also at Whetstone, Grady Ingram, told her inmates were threatened with disciplinary action earlier during the pandemic if they were caught wearing masks because it was a security risk.

"It was alarming very early on in our conversations with the state about how they were not addressing the asymptomatic nature of the virus," said Joe Rubio, lead organizer of the Arizona Interfaith Network.

Prison staff has been required to wear cloth face coverings since June 15 and inmates were provided with face masks on July 2, Lamoreaux said.

"I'm grateful to them for changing that policy and that practice, but I think the implementation of it still leaves a lot to be desired in terms of actually keeping people safe," said Rev. Jennifer A. Reddall, bishop of the Episcopal diocese.

"I can choose to keep away from people, I can choose to wear a mask, I can choose to stay home, I can choose to keep myself and my family safe," Reddall said. "Inmates do not have that ability. They do not get to choose to keep themselves safe, and so it's up to all of us to make sure that policies keep them safe and make sure that those policies are enforced."

PUSHING THE STATE TO PROTECT INMATES

Ingram said inmates were told they had to submit a health needs request in order to get medical help.

Submitting a health needs request cost inmates \$4 unless they were experiencing symptoms related to COVID-19, but only fever was considered a COVID-19 symptom, prison volunteer Crecca said.

After providing several examples of inmates being turned away despite having possible COVID-19 symptoms, the department eventually agreed to suspend medical copays at the end of July, Crecca said.

"I see this as a positive action on their part as it encourages rather than discourages reporting of possible symptoms," she said.

The faith groups started meeting with Department of Corrections Director David Shinn in April and less often with Dr. Cara Christ, Arizona Department of Health Services director, to discuss what the state could do to better protect inmates from the virus.

Those discussions led to the department implementing the testing blitz, and allowing inmates to wear masks.

Father Hunter Ruffin, the pastor at Church of the Epiphany in Tempe, said that with the department nearing the end of testing all inmates, the group is waiting to hear how the state will monitor further exposure.

They are also asking Schinn to release people 90 days before their release date.

Arizona law does not allow people to be released to house arrest if they're high risk for contracting COVID-19 because of their age. But that could be changed through legislative action.

The group will also continue to ask the state to provide a high level of health care for inmates, Ruffin said.

"We find it deplorable that somebody would die in prison because they were not able to get access to appropriate medical care," he said.

Testing is not mandatory for anyone, and officers get tested outside the prison and self-report their results.

Bishop Reddall said the group has suggested the state do pool testing moving forward, where they test a sample from a large group of people together and only test those samples individually if at least one test result is positive.

"No one who is incarcerated should have a death sentence by virus, but particularly those who are incarcerated for low-level offenses," Reddall said.

"They should not be put in a place where they're going to die because of some infraction."