

The Covid-19 Pandemic - a view From Prison

While the rest of the world inches ever so slowly towards some sense of normalcy, life behind the wall remains at a virtual stand still. Due to covid-19 restrictions, I find myself with an exorbitant amount of "free time" on my hands and it grows increasingly difficult to find ways to occupy that time. There are, after all, only so many crossword puzzles and reading one can do in a day.

Thus I have taken to writing about my experiences during this pandemic, which, I have discovered, can be frustrating in and of itself. Being housed in an eighty-man open dormitory, with its endless noises and myriad distractions, is not exactly conducive to a creative environment. Of course, having Attention Defect Disorder doesn't help either. Be that as it may, I offer the following for your consideration.

At the Federal facility where I am currently incarcerated we continue to "shelter in place" and have been doing so since we moved from "modified operations" on April thirteenth. Essentially this means we are on "lock down" status. As of this writing, we have been locked in our housing units for more than sixty days and it seems there is no end in sight. Aside from a daily - if we are lucky - forty-five minute recreation period, there is no movement whatsoever. No education, no programming, no religious services, no work and all our meals are brought to us.

Having been incarcerated for more than nine years, I realize that there are other facilities which are regularly locked down for twenty-three hours a day, but this is a "low security" facility and the anger, anxiety, boredom and frustration among the inmate population, who are not accustomed to such conditions, is increasing daily.

According to the administration at this facility these "shelter in place" orders were enacted nationally in an effort to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. Unfortunately, these actions were taken two months too late.

In order to fully understand the severity of the situation here, I must back-track several months to earlier this year.

Since my arrival here in late January, this facility has experienced no less than an outbreak of scabies, one case of chicken pox, several cases of pneumococcal pneumonia and now, wide spread corona virus, all of which were initially misdiagnosed.

During the week of February second, I began exhibiting symptoms consistent with the influenza virus - fever, chills, body aches, etc. - only this was like the flu on steroids, I don't recall ever being so sick in my life. Shortly afterward, more than half the inmates in my housing unit became ill with similar symptoms. I did not go to Health Services because I knew there was nothing they would do except tell me to drink fluids and take tylenol, both of which I

was already doing. At this time, no one, including myself, suspected that the Coronavirus had entered the facility. It took the better part of three weeks for me to overcome whatever illness I had, and even then I did not feel one hundred percent healthy.

On March thirteenth, due to concerns over a Covid-19 outbreak, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), announced that effective immediately, the BOP was suspending all inmate visitation and prohibiting all volunteers from entering the facility. The administration further announced that while there had as of yet been no confirmed cases of coronavirus at this facility, they would be implementing what they termed "modified operations." at the same time we were encouraged to practice "social distancing." I'm not sure exactly how they expected us to achieve this with over seven hundred inmates in the facility and upwards of eighty men per dorm where the bunks are less than five feet apart and two men are forced to share less than twenty-square feet of living space. Ironically, however, they seemed to want to blame us when we could not possibly comply.

These modified operations lasted less than two weeks before the administration realized that such an endeavor was a logistical impossibility. Hence all programs and activities, including religious services and indoor recreation, were suspended. They began feeding us one unit at a time in the dining hall where we were all made to sit on one side of the tables, facing the same direction and skipping every other seat, allowing space between each inmate.

All of these steps were taken in order to prevent the spread of the virus. I get that and I applaud the effort, I really do, but as I stated before, over half the inmates were already sick with something and I am supremely confident that something was Covid-19.

Citing his concerns regarding the rapid spread of the coronavirus among the prison population, and the potentially devastating effects on the health of its most vulnerable residents, the United States Attorney General, William Barr, in a letter to the Director of the Bureau of Prisons dated March twenty-sixth, recommended that the Bureau expedite the release to home confinement of as many of those inmates who qualify. Whether the BOP ignored that recommendation, or simply could not manage the logistics, no one was released. In fact, of the more than two hundred and fifty inmates at this facility who applied for release under these special conditions, apparently none of them qualified. To date, the only inmates who have been released are those who have filed motions with the courts.

On the twenty-eighth of March, I experienced a relapse of the flu-like symptoms I had back in February and, on the following Monday, at approximately seven in the

morning, I had a seizure. Having been diagnosed more than twenty years ago with a seizure disorder, I am familiar with the warning signs, yet I was unable to prevent myself from losing consciousness and falling face first onto the concrete floor. As a result, I suffered an extremely severe bloody nose, a split lip and a black eye, as well as yet unknown damage to the vertebrae in my neck.

I am forever grateful to several of my fellow inmates who promptly alerted authorities to my predicament. After being transported to the Health Services Department via stretcher, I was given a cursory examination during which the doctor made the following statement: "I can't believe all these people running around like chickens with their heads cut off over a few cases of the flu." Initially no one was wearing any protective equipment, but when I divulged that I was having flu like symptoms, and after confirming that I had a fever, the masks, gowns and face shields came flying off the shelf.

After my examination I was escorted to a make shift quarantine unit and subsequently tested for COVID-19. Three days later I was informed that I did indeed have the coronavirus. Six other men were tested at the same time and all of them were positive also. The next day, the number of infected had doubled, and by the third day, that number tripled.

The unit this facility is using for a quarantine unit had been previously closed for more than a year in an effort to reduce staff salaries. This unit is one of four in the complex containing "two-man" cells and while many of these cells were initially uninhabitable, that fact did not prevent the administration from assigning sick inmates to them. Though I was not assigned to a cell with feces overflowing the toilet, the cell I was assigned to was otherwise filthy with a layer of dirt and grime covering every surface. To remedy this situation I was given a bottle of watered down sanitizing solution and a roll of toilet paper and made to clean the cell myself. The clothes I was wearing at the time were soiled with my own blood and it was four days before I was given a change of clothes or had the opportunity to use the shower.

Most prison cells were originally designed for single occupancy. In their infinite wisdom, however, the powers that be continue to incarcerate more people than any other country on the planet. Therefore, what was once space for one becomes space for two - and sometimes more - simply by adding another bunk. Thus, having a single cell for any length of time is virtually unheard of, as was the case in the quarantine unit. When the numbers of the infected continued to increase exponentially, I was forced to share a cell with another infected inmate. This particular cell measured six feet by nine feet and contained a double bunk, a locker, sink and toilet. So much for social distancing.

On Tuesday, April seventh, after being symptom free for more than seventy-two hours, fifteen inmates, including myself, were released from quarantine and returned to our housing units, where the majority of the inmates were once again sick. Some of those inmates were so ill, they could barely get out of bed. Within a week, all movement was ceased and we have been "sheltering in place" ever since.

Although the warden of this facility issued a memorandum on April sixteenth requiring all inmates to report any symptoms of illness, no matter how minor, to medical staff, many who were sick chose not to for fear of being quarantined, thus further increasing the potential of infecting others. At the time, no one was being tested unless they presented with symptoms, yet everyone who had been tested proved to be positive. Shortly after the warden's memorandum, the administration began to execute daily temperature checks on all inmates.

Finally, on May eleventh, the warden announced that COVID-19 testing would begin for the entire inmate population. The inmates in my housing unit were tested two weeks later and on June eighth we were informed by electronic bulletin that all testing had been completed and if we were not removed from our housing units and placed in quarantine, it means the test came back negative. No one has been removed from my housing unit.

Since his letter of April eighth, in which he expressed his "deep concerns for the health and welfare of the entire inmate population, as well as Bureau staff, the Director of the Bureau of Prisons has been silent.

In April an article in the Washington Post claimed that the "BOP allowed the virus to fester in dozens of prisons before taking action to stop its progress." In an article dated Sunday, May tenth, the Post also stated that on April twenty-ninth, the BOP announced that seventy percent of COVID-19 tests have come back positive, and as of May eighth, 3,701 inmates had tested positive. Since the pandemic began, forty-five inmates have died nationwide.

Claiming gross negligence and deliberate indifference, four inmates from this institution filed a class action suit against the prison, its warden and the Director of the BOP. Following that lawsuit at least one of those inmates has been released, and as a direct result of the lawsuit, on May twenty-seventh, a federal judge, along with several attorneys visited this facility in what amounted to a dog and pony show. If the situation weren't so serious, I would find it comical to watch the administration in the days leading up to the visit. Much as they do just prior to a regional or national inspection they frantically run about the facility, making everything look pretty for our prestigious guests and the minute those visitors walk out the front gate, it's business as usual.

After continuously complaining that we could not possibly comply with social distancing requirements, the administration, on June first, finally took steps to attempt to alleviate the cramped quarters in our housing units. These efforts amounted to the shuffling of several inmates and the shifting of a few benches, creating a miniscule amount of space, but three days later someone within the administration decided to move several more inmates to our housing unit, negating the actions previously taken.

The truth of the matter is this: if anyone within the Bureau of Prisons, either on the local or national level, were in any way serious about "social distancing"; if they truly cared about the spread of covid-19, or the health and welfare of its inmate population, they would have to reduce the prison population by half, and that is simply not a reality.

The reality of the situation is that we have created this conundrum ourselves. In the name of "justice", and under the guise of safety and security, we as a society have allowed the leaders of our government to incarcerate far too many people for far too long. Multiple studies by multiple sources all agree that society would be much better served if those individuals who have been convicted of low level drug offenses and non-violent crimes were allowed to serve their sentences on either home confinement or probation, allowing these offenders to work, be with their families and contribute to society. The money saved on housing, feeding, clothing and health care could then be funnelled back into vital community programs.

We as a society need to explore social justice reforms including alternate sentencing options. If we were to embrace the concepts of restorative justice, rather than continuing to rely on the aggressively punitive system currently in place, we may not be faced with the potentially devastating situation we find ourselves in today. I can't even begin to imagine what an Ebola pandemic in prison would look like.