

P. 1/15  
PI

## CORONAVIRUS CRISIS AT

### ELKTON: A TIMELINE

#### PART I.

by Roy Son

I am incarcerated in Elkton, a severely affected Federal prison compound in Ohio, currently struggling with the Coronavirus. Our crisis continues to make both local and national news as I write these words. The situation has caught the attention of some of the highest-seated officials in the country. I say "crisis" because that is exactly what this is: a crucial moment, stressful, traumatic. And deadly, for some.

This multi-part essay is my effort to document the

P. 2  
PZ

situation, as best as I am able during this ordeal and with the limited resources I have available. The chronology and details are key in showing what I think was poor preparation and negligent policies, which are prevalent in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP).

As of the date I write this, officially, we are at least thirty-eight days into this crisis; by my count, ninety-nine days; and by what the Director of the BOP claims, we are starting on our fifth month. And utilizing the sequence of days, starting in March but covering January and February, I've laid out this multi-part essay as a timeline. If I am certain of a specific date, I state it as such, but if the event-in-question's ~~ma~~ date is not sure, I <sup>to me</sup> ballpark it, admitting to the uncertainty. January, February, and early March are the least-certain timeframe of events. I've done

p.3  
PI

my best to relate truth as truth, unsure details as <sup>unsure</sup> ~~just that~~,  
and rumors and pure speculation as <sup>the inherit state of prison and a crisis.</sup> ~~just so, too~~. An mistakes, thus,  
are the fault of the author.

Also, I've tagged what I feel are the important  
questions, in their relevant places.

I submit this essay, its parts, in order to further justice  
and provide much needed transparency and integrity to that pursuit.

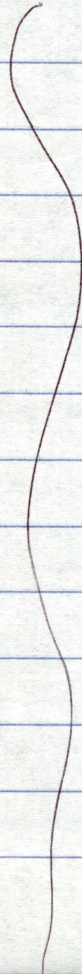
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February and March: There were individuals who were sick,  
anywhere from late-February, well into March. I took these to be colds  
or flu. The Coronavirus was the boogey man of other countries, it  
seemed, and while it could come to the United States, surely it would  
not travel so fast, Serious for sure, but tricky to pin down in a  
local sense. My first knowledge of the virus was a tiny article

p. 4  
PZ

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buried deeply at the last bit of space in the Wall Street Journal's first section. Honestly, I read the title and my first thought recalled the opening of the novel World War Z. I wish I had read that article, but that statement in itself shows plainly the concern I had for this, at the time, mysterious, distant virus. By January the 21<sup>st</sup> it wasn't so distant and how serious it was, well... how serious was the government taking it by that point?



P.S  
PZ

March, the first three weeks: I think the day was the 10th of March, but I'm not sure. I am sure it was in those first two weeks, at some point, when we had our health fair here at the Federal Satellite Low (FSL). I did not attend; I had other concerns I wanted to attend to, and I'd had medical appointments recently (and more to come), so I saw no point. The health fair is a voluntary, go-if-you-wish sort of thing. And besides this, there were growing worries, by many, of the Big Inspection by the American ~~Association~~ Correctional Association (ACA), coming up.

As I said, there were a handful of individuals sick at this time, evident at Food Service and in the program I went to. One person was sick for a while, seemingly better, then ill again. I had a runny nose, at one point, though that was <sup>gone</sup> ~~over~~ after a few days. And Corona had found its way into the country, and now it wasn't that

P.6  
PZ

distant boogymen but the mean stranger within sight. Washington State, then somewhere else, and closer yet. Spreading. Now there was some local feel to the virus's threat, and some steps were being taken, even at the FSH, for our protection.

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~~the~~ fellow prisoner complained to the treatment

specialist in our program, that we had no hand soap, no soap dispensers in our housing unit for us. How were we to practice proper hand-washing technique without essential supplies? I sympathized some with his frustration, and admittedly I agreed, though I knew the Elkton staff's reasoning for not installing and providing such things.

After all, we had our commissary soap, mainly body wash and all-in-one varieties. There's the three-in-one hygiene soap, an 8oz bottle, we get each week (if we're up early at six a.m. and willing to trek to Laundry). The situation about the dispensers, in the unit sink rooms,

p. 7  
PI

was that there used to be dispensers for use, but because the prisoners themselves could not handle the responsibility of policing ~~them~~ -- preventing breakages and stopping or reporting the stealing of their soapy contents -- the dispensers were removed. Or so the rumor was; perhaps they'd never been installed from day one. But what I found frustratingly amusing was that our specialist, a touch of germaphobia to his manner, hadn't a clue that we had no dispensers of soap in our sink rooms!

The powers-that-be staggered meal times for the two floors of the housing unit. That meant timelimits: five minutes to walk to the chow hall, ten minutes to eat, then a brief delay to wipe the table tops -- given directions by staff to, essentially, reverse what the ~~prisoners~~ <sup>table wipers</sup> were when originally told was the proper procedure, ~~and~~ using the sanitizer and soap liquids -- and last, the other floor was called.

Elsewhere, a note was taped to the library door: No more than ten inmates at a time permitted, to paraphrase. This was new, and

P. 8  
PI

I found this odd because it'd now be so, well, unused, compared with usual traffic to a small room. In total, it had sixteen chairs, standing room for a handful more patrons. Let's call its total capacity, having no idea what a fire marshal would deem appropriate, set at twenty. Staff had cut that figure in half.

And recreation had limits set, too.

No measures, though, were set for the housing unit, which has four sections as main housing areas, and many common areas, halls and offices. Two sections to a floor, each floor sharing <sup>a</sup>~~the~~ center office, one unit correctional officer (CO), counselor, mailbox and so on. All, normally, use the same stairwell.

Coronavirus, elsewhere in the country, continued to spread. The stock market with its jittery drops, reflected our collective doubts and worries as a nation. Inside prison, I felt that first tickle in my throat late on March 13th. My symptoms grew in number,



P.9

PI

and I wondered if the "boogeyman" had traveled the world, in less than four full months, to infect me? Runny nose, fever, sinus pain behind the left side of my nose. Watery eyes. It felt more like a bad headcold than a novel virus. Generic Tylenol handled the fever, gone in two or three days. As the left-side's pain diminished and the runny nose dried up, the opposite side on the right flared with a familiar ache, and my eyes watered once again. This time I had a stuffy nose. Each sinus pain seemed to last five or six days, and I didn't feel any better, even after that.

Coronavirus, I was certain, had reached Elkton.

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March 24th (?): For the past few days, rumors mounted that some guys had been going to sick call, had shown to have a high temperature, and were taken to the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) for quarantine, a

P. 10  
PZ

standard practice at Elkton, as was explained in one of the near-annual, pre-flu season ~~meetings~~ <sup>town</sup> hall meetings, presided by a top Health Services (HS) staff member. In order to prevent the spread of flu, they will send those with a high-enough-for-concern temperature to the SHU; although, she noted, if, say, it got to where there were twenty (the figure she used), they'd likely lock down the unit, or units. I believe this is how they decided to handle the Coronavirus, and that's what it was being compared to, by the media: flu, pneumonia.

Despite those early social distancing measures and the practice of using the SHU for quarantining the infected, the virus inched its way from person to person. Note, though, that I can only assume it to be COVID-19 at the time, because no testing at the institution nor any official word had been provided. But people were sick <sup>v</sup> fevers,

P. II

P. I

coughing. They disappeared, almost unnoticed, through Medical's door.

While the country was reacting to COVID-19, at Elkton, new 8.5 x 11 printouts, posters about hand washing and germs, appeared, tacked to various places, like walls and doors and windows. And some time in those last two weeks (likely the last week) Medical, pushing a cart, wheeled through the housing unit, placing refilled soap bottles with push-to-foam nozzles (makeshift dispensers) atop sinks, about four "dispensers" per sink room, a total itself of four. HS also posted notifications on the electronic bulletin board on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup>. A "Keep calm And Wash Your Hands" sign, from the CDC, appeared on the 24<sup>th</sup>. COVID-19 FAQs and more hand-washing bulletins came the next two days.

Possibly the virus had been here for weeks and they were just getting to basics.

March 25<sup>th</sup>: The warden posted his first notification

p.12  
PI

concerning the virus. In our section, rumor floated around that medical staff were coming to the housing unit checking temperatures, and more people were sent to Medical.

March 26<sup>th</sup>: Again, word was that Medical was checking temps. We could not be sure how many were, then, in the SHU or hospitalized. Things, such as what would be true for the compound under normal operations, were mostly routine, the biggest difference being the timed meal schedule, which itself was mostly enforced: the first shift is typically the strictest with adhering to procedures/policy, Monday through Friday; otherwise, things can be lax, such as schedules and social distancing. Most of the top brass are only around on the first shift, Mon-Fri.

March 27<sup>th</sup>: This day was the largest measure <sup>against</sup> ~~to prevent~~ COVID-19 yet enacted. One section was tested -- temperature checked --

and those with fevers were sent to Medical. That number was near twelve people. The remaining prisoners were told to secure their things, that they would be moved to the other three sections of the housing unit. That evacuated section was designated as the quarantine area.

March 28<sup>th</sup> through the 31<sup>st</sup>: We are locked down at the FSH, and only released from the unit to collect our meals at their scheduled times. Breakfast and Lunch ~~are~~<sup>were</sup> in clam shells, where as supper was a brown-bag meal. Breakfast and lunch were our regular meals and supper was both a baloney sandwich and a peanut butter sandwich. Commissary, after recently being closed for quarterly inventory, was open. The warden ~~reposts~~<sup>reposted</sup> a FAQ previously posted by HS.

Around this time I realized I no longer had a sense of taste nor smell. The stuffy nose and sinus pain still lingered. I thought, innocently at the time, that the lock down, the "temporary" section and

bunk assignments would be over in two weeks or so. The reality, truly, hadn't even dawned for me yet, either.

The following are questions I have concerning the months of February and March:

- 1) What official measures, by Elkton staff and the BOP, were taken to prepare for COVID-19, and ensure the safety and security of the institutions?
- 2) When were the Coronavirus test kits first available for the prisoners and staff of Elkton, and when was the first test administered and by whom?
- 3) Had the BOP and Elkton staff been logging medical data related to any and all complaints and symptoms of persons at Elkton and the data dated? Are they logging pertinent data now, or have they at any time during this crisis?

P. 15 /  
PZ 15

4) When did the symptoms of Coronavirus first present themselves at Elkton or the local area?