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CORONAVIRUS CRISIS AT

ELKTON: A TIMELINE

PART VI.

by Roy Son

August 1st: I wasn't sure on what to expect this month to be like. More normal? Or much the same? On one hand I strongly suspected the Elkton brass wanted as much normalcy as possible. On the other, outside attention, a second wave, the approaching fall, flu and new arrivals all said that "normal" was out of the question. The coronavirus was still too big an issue and the BOP had too greatly botched their initial response to relax. And they shouldn't relax, but there is a lot more they can do.

August 2nd: I had realized that the warden's 13 regular units and 3 quarantine units statement in July was misleading. Really it is: 16 units — that's four buildings, and three out of four with a quarantine. All in the numbers.

August 3rd: The milk crates were working fine in HA. GA, back to a general population section, ~~were~~ ^{was} not as satisfied with a plastic crate as a mailbox. The bravo sides had bolted — to — the — floor mailboxes. But there are — or were — real mailboxes in the cleaning supply rooms. Two rooms, one brown mailbox in each. These mailboxes were used to hold magazines for recycling.

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Now they were removed, brought to the alpha sides to the mirroring spot like where the bravo mailboxes are. Well, they worked fine, too, but there was more to this than I had realized.

August 5th: Some prisoners who work for facilities were called. Visibly, there wasn't much to this, no noticeable change. There was something ~~different~~ else, though, we hadn't seen for some time: Medical callouts. Only medical callouts. This did give some aura of back-to-normal. It felt that way. But these callouts were not on the usual formatted sheet but written on a regular sheet of printer-paper.

August 6th: This day echoed the feel of the previous and added to the air of new-circumstance to our lives. Prisoners mowed the inner grounds. Though, admittedly, this was done once or twice in the past few months since March 27th. And there were more callouts, all medical.

August 7th: Around 8:00 a.m. the unit manager came through, telling people to tighten up their rooms, make things look tidier, etc. Clean up our cubicles. And we were required to wear our masks in the TV rooms. The manager told us the "Central Office" was coming, any day, to inspect Elktion. This was the BOP's main office from D.C. New signs were taped to the TV room doors -- nice, colorful laminated signs, 8.5 x 11: "STOP: MASK REQUIRED." No such sign for the laundry, supply rooms, though. The missing information sheets on the orange boards were replaced with crisp, new sheets. None of the virus-related information was new, though: these were the same from February, March, April. And on the Trulines bulletin board the Assistant Wardens' Department posted

~~that~~ ^{the} very same old-COVID-19 sheets, eight total, all preventative stuff. And there was no post-coronavirus health issues information posted. New, hand written signs were taped to the wall, just above the phones and on the counter top by the computers. There was a wrag and spray bottle placed by the phones -- of course, they had been there for months by this point. No bottle or wrag for the computers, though, also as had been the case for months.

August 8th: We were granted outside rec on the weekends. One section at a time; one hour a piece.

August 10th: No inspection yet. The unit manager came through again, handing out a form, a form that specified a handful of basic social distancing and precautionary details concerning the virus -- nothing that hadn't already been said or that, to some degree, wasn't already going on. We could sign the sheets, stating that the manager had gone over the information with us. Or we could refuse -- a staple of BOP mindset: either you play by our rules, right or wrong, or you refuse and your refusal will be used against you -- and a witness would sign. They offered spare cloth masks if we needed any. These masks are no good, in my opinion. It's light canvas fabric. One sheet, folded once. "Two layers." The fabric has large, square pores, plenty of air travel compared to an M-95.

August ¹²th: New typed, printed signs, echoing the hand-written signs are taped to the walls by the phones and computers. No cleaning supplies separate from those for the phones are issued for the computer area. And no such things for the laundry

August 13th: The warden posted a new memo. He states that all units at Elkton are back to general population. There are still quarantine areas for the few still testing positive, and for those to be released to half way house. These areas are without phones, computers, showers, etc. And I don't believe they were being allowed commissary shopping.

He states that movement throughout the BOP has resumed. This seemed reckless, even if they were doing so "in a controlled manner." He says this will mean smaller groups and lack a set schedule. If a person is designated to move to another institution, he wants us to know that our institution is getting priority, to reduce our population. Nothing Elkton has done since March has involved truly reducing our population. Not enough compassionate releases. Not enough home confinements. And allowing the regularly scheduled reentry dates come and pass in order to reduce the population is too slow, and too few, to help much. And for years Elkton has been happy to increase and crowd and over-crowd its population at the FCZ and FSL. Almost six whole months and there are still too many people here.

He says things are starting to loosen up on the compound -- but that's not true. We're still stuck to the housing unit. Rec is no more really than it has been since March. Sure, programming is back but at a tiny imitation of itself pre-COVID-19. Same for education classes. To my knowledge, the BOP never bothered to test or facilitate or encourage staff to get tested. Our masks are porous. And now they want to do group sessions for the

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program in a small room. Recreation (indoor) and Education still are not open. Classes are done in the unit without teachers.

He mentions that "prevention guidance and restrictions" are still in place. And he uses the surge of cases from June and July as explanations for this and says we "had a firsthand look at this here a few months ago." Well sure we did. You recklessly mixed up the population, encouraging spread. And to state it as "a few months ago" is highly misleading. Coronavirus was here sooner than they bothered to acknowledge and is still here, it didn't stop in May for us but easily continued on. Just more dishonesty.

And finishes by saying that they are fully aware that any further introduction of this virus will likely be from the "outside" -- probably from a pesky "inmate" to be transferred here. I doubt Staff will or are currently being tested. And need to state that they weren't overly concerned about outside-to-inside contamination in February or March. (And April through to the present, thanks, as I understand it, to the BOP union bullying the BOP into not testing staff and not quarantining staff this whole time.)

And Education distributed a Q/A form. It was to evaluate reading, literacy competency; something that should have been done a long time ago, and to every new prisoner. If a person said "Yes" to most of those questions they would have needed someone there with them to read it for them, for they would not have been able to do so on their own. No Education staff around to assist, though.

August 14th: Several names were called and put into the Visitation quarantine for fourteen days; transfers, I guessed.

And this day Commissary and laundry posted new signs by their windows, telling us to wear our masks. Or to wash our hands -- but there's no bathroom -- at the FSL or the FCI -- in order to do so. And no cleaner or wipes for the Commissary thumb-pad scanner. (Just like in the housing unit.) The newest sign I can find is the handwashing sign, dated May, at commissary and is a Spanish version of the same sheet from April. And the commissary room at the FSL is limited to ten people. It's smaller than the library and the library, in March, allowed only ten for social distancing.

August 15th to 17th: There was nothing normal about our situation. Everything was pretty much still closed. Clam shell meals. Handwashing signs, ad nauseum. Token gestures at programming was the only real change, and that was with a program barely running. Nothing, really, had changed.

August 18th: The program, after minor details, resumed. Going very slowly, at a fraction of its former self, and with no promises as to the future.

We are told by staff that they don't want the sections interacting with each other. Silly now and a far cry from their attitudes in March and April and May.

No reason given to see that programs would kick in to gear at a normal pace -- for anyone who's still waiting to sign up. This will delay things for months.

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August 20th: Between the Chow hall exit -- the corridor that leads past commissary, barber ~~shop~~^{shop}, laundry to medical's entrance -- and the Medical door, red strips of tape were cut and stuck to the floor. You guessed it, six feet apart. At the corridor entrance/exit door right by Medical, the ~~path~~^{outside} path under the awning had red stripes of paint, six feet apart. Twenty-Seven stripes in total. (And there are plenty of spaces were red could have been put down on top of that.)

There was some kind of apparent "inspection." Very brief and uneventful.

August 21st to 24th: At some point another staff member informed us that another inspection, at some point, was expected. By whom? Didn't say.

August 25th: Another large, painted ~~wooden~~^{wooden} board was put up on the wall facing the section entrance/exit Sally port; and I suspect all other sections got similar signs. It's white with a large blue section to the right side. The sign reads: Stop. Think -- Did I use the bathroom? Did I eat? Did I touch something? Adjust my mask? -- and Wash Your Hands. In a common-use area your hands will be raw and sore after all the hand washing you would have to do.

August 28th: we got our first Adult Continuing Education (A.C.E.) class packet; one that had been promised for over two weeks. This, besides some GED classes in the unit, was the first attempt by Education dept. to provide learning opportunities to us since March 27th. It's a packet, covering the Solar System. With a 70% completion the prisoner, in one month,

will receive "5 hours of programming credits." This is one packet per month. Five hours of credit per month; credit only of value to the BOP.

I overheard a guy say that the canteen would not open up until the middle of 2021. Social distancing is not possible in the large dining room, and this is true, and one of the few, few areas the BOP will admit as such. So with that scale, I can see programming, classes and indoor rec playing out the same way. Spacing was already a problem in prisons before Coronavirus, and now, in terms of rehabilitation, that space has been taken or greatly reduced. Now with taken gestures of rehabilitation, time, too, has been compromised, things will crawl at a snail's pace.

Questions for August:

- 1) Will transfer frequency between institutions increase in order to lower Elkton's prison population?
- 2) Will staff be made to test for the virus, and for the flu, this fall/winter?
- 3) Will we receive any up-to-date information concerning COVID-19, or post-coronavirus health information?
- 4) Will bunks be removed to help keep the population reduced?
- 5) How prepared is the BOP to fight a second-wave?
- 6) How will the BOP handle asymptomatic cases and testing?