

'You've Got Masks: Stop Complaining'

By Christopher Blackwell | April 21, 2020



Photo by Tim Dennell

While laying on my two-inch-thick mattress pad, I see an arm sticking through the bars of my cell. A guard is trying to hand me a bag full of what looks to be folded-up cloth.

The guard shakes the bag, telling me to hurry up and grab it. I grab the bag and the papers attached to it, but when I start to ask what it is, the guard just laughs.

As he walks away, he says, "Now you guys have masks, so stop complaining."

Prisoners on other floors of the unit are yelling and making jokes. One shouts, "Thanks for the cutup bed-sheet dumbass." To my right, a prisoner says, "Dude, I put the mask together and the hair tie already broke." He starts to yell for the guard to bring him another one.

As I start digging through the bag I received, I can see what they are complaining about.

What we have been given is laughable at best. Inside the bag are four hair ties (incredibly thin and weak), two coffee filters, two extremely thin pieces of cloth made from what looks like old prison bedsheets cut the size of a head bandana (when holding them to the light you can see right through them as if they were made of lace), and instructions on how to make a mask.

If you can call it that.

My mind floods with questions. Would this thin cloth actually protect me? What if someone doesn't have the skills to construct the mask? I know so many prisoners who have trouble reading or have mobility issues with their hands. Why didn't they just give us masks that were already made?

I hear my neighbor knocking on the concrete wall that separates us. "Can you believe this is what they gave us?" he says.

I read the instructions that were attached to the mask.

"The safety of our employees, incarcerated individuals, residents, and supervised population continues to be the top priority for the department, your friends and family and external stakeholders," it begins.

I'm skeptical. If this were the main motivation, the Department of Corrections (DOC) would have acted weeks ago, not only to give us proper masks but most importantly provide access to the cleaning products we know would best serve us in keeping the virus at bay: alcohol-based hand sanitizers and cleaning wipes for common areas, like the phones.

I do not believe my safety is a "top priority" for them. We are told only what DOC believes we need to know, sometimes via printed memos they slide through our bars at 2 am while yelling at us to wake up, and other times via messages on a communal electronic kiosk we line up to access.

As I continue reading, my frustration grows. It is more of the same fluff we have been receiving since we received our first midnight memo on March 12, notifying us that a guard had tested positive for COVID-19.

The list of lies goes on. Knowing these statements to be untrue makes it even harder to trust those who have our health and safety in their hands.

Before all DOC staff entering the prison were required to wear some form of face covering, prisoners were pro-actively working to convince administration to allow us to make masks for the population.

Members of the Washington State Reformatory (WSR) Native American group, along with prisoner representatives, were constructing and sending proposals on how this could be done. The Native American group even proposed using their own group materials to make the masks, costing DOC nothing.

Yet these proposals fell on deaf ears.

The prison authorities responded to our grievances by saying they did not constitute an emergency complaint. They cited a sentence in the Offender Grievance Manual that said, "an emergency complaint must involve serious threat to life or health of an offender or potential threat to the orderly operation of a prison."

I am very sure the contraction of a deadly virus is considered to be a serious threat to my life and/or health.

With such responses, it is easy to see why none of us behind these walls trust prison officials.

Nor is it a surprise that DOC grievance coordinators are acting as roadblocks. Prisoners know well that they're unlikely to get relief from these avenues.

But what I find curious is that guards at our prison continue to complain they are being forced to wear a mask.

When first told by the prison superintendent to wear masks, guards went to union reps to block the order. They were temporarily successful, putting prisoners at further risk of exposure to the virus while the bureaucratic nightmare of red tape was worked out on who actually had the power to enforce this mandate.

It wasn't until Washington state DOC Secretary Stephen Sinclair and Gov. Jay Inslee stepped in, that the mandate was followed.

Despite the grievance office's assertions, our health is obviously at risk. If we contract the virus, it will be brought in by the guards. Just the other day, our prison was locked down on another 14-day quarantine because another guard tested positive for COVID-19.

Information about which one contracted the virus is left in the shadows, leaving us to only guess who had been in direct contact with him.

This gives prisoners even more reasons to have little to no faith that we will receive information that will best protect us.

I can't help but feel as if myself and the many who live behind these walls are nothing more than an afterthought, that we are expected to just do as we are told, and blindly follow those who have deceived and oppressed us for decades.

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