

COVID-19 Prison Dilemma: Is Security More Important Than Health?

By Christopher Blackwell | April 10, 2020



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One unexpected thing this pandemic has taught me is that prisoners and correctional officers are in this together. They are as scared and anxious as we are.

Correctional officers find themselves facing extremely high demands from the administration. Many officers are now mandated to work double shifts, sometimes several days in a row, contributing to exhaustion and overwork.

The lack of sufficient officers is quite apparent. I have been concerned to witness officers working double shifts: going from working in the quarantined unit where the officer who tested positive for COVID-19 worked, to working in the un-quarantined units the next shift.

This puts themselves— and us— at severe risk.

I have also talked to officers with concerning health issues, such as lung deficiencies and asthma, who are expected to make the choice between coming to work and getting paid or staying at home and receiving no pay at all.

It forces them to make a choice that could cost them their lives.

So far, the administration only offers paid leave to those who show symptoms of COVID-19, not those particularly vulnerable. Given the nature of prisons and the close contact between individuals within them, no person should be asked to make such a choice.

These officers should receive paid leave until working conditions are better able to support their safety. This is yet another display of the lack of leadership by the administration to protect officers and prisoners in their care.

It is clear that those who are in leadership roles are unprepared for the COVID-19 crisis.

The cracks in the administration's leadership skills continue to be unveiled as each day passes. This, in turn, exposes prisoners and correctional officers to the dangers of COVID-19.

Bypass 'Unnecessary' Red Tape

Administrators need to bypass unnecessary bureaucratic red tape.

They must take the time to listen to those on the front lines inside our prisons, such as unit sergeants and officers. They must apply the recommendations of the Centers on Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to prison environments. This will allow us to properly clean the facilities, and to protect all within the prison as best we can in these crowded conditions.

For far too long, prisons have been the scene of a dysfunctional narrative that pits guards against inmates. The nation's health emergency offers a rare opportunity for administrators, correctional officers and prisoners to work together for common safety.

In this moment, the only sides that should be taken are human beings against an indiscriminating virus. If the emergence of this virus has shown us anything, it should be this: the only way we will beat this is if we work together.

We can start by supplying prisoners with effective cleaning supplies and giving them transparency around what is being done to protect them.

Yet, prisoners and our loved ones are left in purgatory as the measures the Department of Corrections must adopt swiftly in order to ensure our safety—measures like the CDC-recommendations for alcohol-based hand sanitizer, free soap, and increased cleaning—are being slowed down or stopped altogether by bureaucratic red tape.

It took close to a month to receive free antibacterial soap in my facility.

These roadblocks complicated even the most minor decisions when it comes to the safety of prisoners and the correctional staff who work within the prison. Decisions like how the prison is cleaned, which cleaning products prisoners are allowed to use to prevent the spread of the virus, and where and when living units will receive those products go unresolved.

When the Washington Department of Corrections (WDOC) administration called for enhanced cleaning and sanitation measures, how this was to be implemented was left up to the individual prisons. That left room for inaction, confusion and differing interpretations.

WDOC Headquarters also announced the need to implement social distancing; but what that looks like in a prison is anybody's guess.

Given that prison administrators have never faced such obstacles as the public health crisis we are now forced to address, they are having a difficult time making logical decisions through a public health lens as opposed to the traditional security lens.

For example, one sticking point in complying with the CDC recommendation that all prisons make alcohol-based hand sanitizer available to the incarcerated population (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/correction-detention/guidance-correctional-detention.html>) is that people might be tempted to drink the solution.

Balance Competing Fears

The fear of this apparently outweighs the fear of the spreading virus.

Administrators who have relied on a security lens for decades are now being asked to center public health in their decision making. Currently, in order to access germicidal spray to clean your living space you must check out a communal spray bottle that is shared by 160 other men from unit officers and return it promptly.

They've even taken the time to post a notice in our living unit reminding us that if we're caught with an unauthorized cleaning bottle we will be penalized. During a pandemic, having unfettered access to personal cleaning products seems common sense.

But clearly not in prison.

The illogical and dangerous decisions administrators continue to make regarding our health and safety leave prisoners and on-the-ground correctional officers vulnerable to a virus that cares little about the security procedures administrators hold so dearly.

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