

In March of 2020 COVID-19 became the end of an era and the beginning of a new reality. Being incarcerated during this pandemic has changed the entire concept of doing time.

I was in Pennington County Jail in South Dakota when COVID-19 changed the world. I was waiting to be sentenced in federal court for various white collar crime. I remember watching the national news everyday at the same time with pretty much the same group of inmates that I spent my time with, talked with, played cards with, ate "chow" with, and lived with in a cellblock. We would all come together and watch as the news gave updates on what was happening in the world. People were dying and the world was forever changing from the pandemic COVID-19. By that time, I had been in jail for 1 year and 4 months.

When you're incarcerated time stops and all things outside of "lock up" become timeless even though life goes on for the free world. I remember when lock downs were announced and I started to notice less and less traffic going by. From inside it was heavy in the air that people were scared.

However, staff still came to work, people still got arrested and came to jail, and I was still doing time.

It wasn't until my sentencing in April of 2020 that COVID-19 affected my life. My sentencing was changed to video court and I would stay at the county jail in a cellblock set up for this rather than an in person hearing before the judge. It was a right I had to sign off on. My attorney assured me that being on video instead of in the courtroom wouldn't make a difference in the outcome. I guess I'll never know. I was sentenced to 81 months in federal prison. Next would be my transfer. But due to the pandemic and increased restrictions it would be another 4 months before I left the county jail.

When I finally left county I was transferred to Winner South Dakota and was moved from there in less than 24 hours and drove to Sioux Falls, South Dakota where I boarded Con Air and then flown to Rochester, Minnesota. When the plane unloaded, I and a group of females, got on a bus bound for the final destination - Waseca FCI.

The experience of being outside,

traveling, being asked medical questions pertaining to COVID-19 symptoms, getting my temperature taken by everyone at every stop, seeing people in PPE gear, and wearing masks was a complete shock.

Pulling up to Waseca FCI August 18, 2020 I was exhausted. Flying on Con Air after just a few hours of sleep with all the dramatic procedures that go on just to make it on and off the airplane drained all my energy. I had no choice but to dig deep and find the strength for what was coming next.

We were met by health care staff and were called off the bus a few at a time to be swabbed for what would be my first COVID-19 test. The intake process is an assembly line scenario. We are all stripped, cavities (full body) checked visually, and then ran through a body scanner to make extra sure we weren't carrying anything inside our bodies. My clothes were taken - (county stripes) and I was given temporary clothes to wear until my exact sizes were documented and laundry can issue prison uniforms and underclothing. My picture was taken for my new prison ID and I was

given bedding.

The first day in prison is hectic, scary, and most of all depressing. I just entered the "unknown" and that very first day is filled with many. A lot of questions are asked during the intake, but hardly any information is offered or given. Each new room entered is unknown. Each new face seen is unknown. I was completely stripped of my identity as an individual and became a number. There is never an opportunity to prepare for anything.

The test results for the COVID-19 test taken when we all got off the bus would take a couple days. It wasn't the rapid test. After the intake was over we (23 inmates came in that day) were catted to the designated "quarantine" area. I was shown where my bunk and locker space would be and was left to unpack, organize, and make my bed. The "quarantine" area was in a basement in a tri-plex building that housed the rest of a unit (A Unit) as well as B Unit and E Unit.

A-1 Unit basement was used as the "quarantine" area. There in the basement is where all 23 shared the social

dayroom area, the showers, and the bunk areas were open above about 10 feet of partial wall space. Our meals were brought to us from food service on a cart containing disposable containers. At one point, after COVID-19 was discovered in our group, we had a meal randomly served on plastic trays (which can hold the virus for an extended amount of time) that were taken back to the kitchen for washing by other inmates in food service. The ice was refilled each day in the same container that was taken to the general unit area and refilled in the same ice machine that general population (the rest of) A-unit uses.

As far as cleaning goes, the quarantine area had some supplies in A-1 Unit basement upon arrival. There was no direction when we arrived; who or when the area of living was expected to be cleaned. No information was given. It was quickly apparent that unless someone took the initiative to be a volunteer orderly (cleaner), the areas would not have been cleaned regularly.

- Typically in a lock up setting people need to be told what to do and when, all day. So I, along with another inmate, cleaned the A-1 Unit basement daily. Initially we had hdq C2 sanitizer and restroom

cleaner that appears (by the label) a stronger cleaner or more effective to fight a virus. We also had rags and mop heads, but no gloves. The restroom cleaner only lasted a couple days into quarantine. It ran out in the entire compound at the same time and was never re-supplied to the prison until the week October 19, 2020. That was, at least, the next time the cleaner became available to inmates for cleaning. The rest of the cleaning supplies were fairly easy to get replenishments at first or in the very beginning of our 21 day quarantine. We had a correctional officer do a walk-through of the whole unit every hour.

A couple of days into quarantine an inmate was removed from our group and placed in the SHU - special housing unit. She was positive for COVID-19. She had come with a group of females and males on Con Air from Grady County Oklahoma's transfer center.

As anyone might imagine the vibe in the air turned to fear and frustration. We were all unsure of our very existence at that point. What was going to happen next? Am I going to get sick? Is the inmate who tested positive going to be taken care of? What can I do to

protect myself? All I know is that I had tested negative on that first test; meaning I was not sick when I got here.

No procedures to prevent exposure or cross contamination from our group to the rest of the general population inmates living right on the other side of our door was implemented. We still shared the same ice in the ice machine, we still had the same unsanitized cart coming in and out of the unit throughout the day from food service delivering our meals. The healthcare nursing staff went through unit to unit with a pill container box and would be wearing the same PPE as the previous unit to distribute necessary prescriptions to our group in "quarantine".

On Tuesday August 25, 2020 after being at Waseca FCI for just one week another round of rapid tests were given to the remaining quarantined inmates and all but 2 inmates tested positive for COVID-19. I had tested positive as well. I remember a feeling of dread before the test because I had started having symptoms but I was scared and unsure what to do. I developed a cough and congestion. Was I sick? What do I do now? I'm trapped in this basement in a prison and I just

tested positive for COVID-19 and I'm helpless to do anything if I get really sick and possibly need to go to the hospital. Instead of taking the rest of the positive tests to the SHU; the decision was made to bring the other inmates back to the "quarantine" area in the basement and take the last 2 negative testing inmates to the SHU.

I came to find out that that same week some inmates in general population started making complaints of feeling sick and having symptoms of COVID-19. Tests were given and positive results started coming back. Those inmates who tested positive for COVID-19 were brought to the same general area which had been cleared out across from the "quarantine" area in the basement of the unit.

At one point during the week of August 25, 2020, our group in "quarantine" was denied replenishments for all cleaning supplies. The staff, specifically CO Trevino told us that Lieutenant Ruffolo and a counselor by the name of Linnes said that because the inmates in quarantine were "cleaning too much" and would not be getting replenishments on any supplies. The CO also stated that we were to wash and dry the dirty rags and dirty mop heads ourselves in our quarantine area.

I was shocked and confused. The thing is when you are unable to communicate face to face with people that have the ability to answer questions and deal with any issues it's an indescribable feeling of unease that consumes your mind leaving you with extreme anxiety and distress on top of having COVID-19 and no access to properly address any type of emergency situation that could occur at any moment.

Finally on Sunday August 30, 2020 Warden Starr of Waseca FCI came in PPE gear to the quarantined basement to "answer questions." She stated that daily assessments (vitals) that were taken by the health staff would continue until September 7, 2020 when we would all be listed as "recovered". At that time we would all be moved to general population areas on September 8, 2020. I took that opportunity to inquire with the warden about the cleaning supplies that had run out completely days ago. The warden replied by stating directly to me that supplies would be brought to us "right away." The warden was accompanied by the same CO (Trevino) that told me that we were no longer able to get cleaning replenishments days before. Trevino made no comments while this

conversation was taking place. No cleaning supplies were brought to us until the following day after more persistence on my part and with the insistence that the warden herself had approved supplies the day before. Meanwhile, more and more general population inmates were being moved to the same unit we were housed following more positive COVID-19 tests. No procedures were implemented or changed to prevent the continued spread of COVID-19 at Waseca FCI.

Staff members began to quit and health services clearly started becoming overwhelmed with no relief. There were several inmates that had more severe symptoms and had to wait long periods of time for assistance; sometimes hours. To watch another human being struggle to breathe and have no ability to help is a crush to the spirit to say the least. That became my reality and my start in federal prison.

On September 8, 2020 all of my group from quarantine were moved into the general population units. I, along with several from our group moved to C Unit while the rest of our group moved to B Unit. C Unit is an open bay living area. I was hired as an orderly (officially paid

12¢ an hour) on September 10, 2020 to help clean in C Unit. One week went by and I was called in to Unit Management who then informed me that I would be working in laundry services for the entire compound. The other inmates from our original quarantine group was hired on the same day to work in food services for the entire compound and would be responsible for breakfast, lunch, and dinner until further notice. We were told the reason we were in these positions was because we were "recovered." The problem that was ignored was that some of these inmates were still having symptoms.

Over the course of September and October 2020 every unit on the Waseca compound with the exception of E Unit which housed the RDAP (Residential Drug Addiction Program) was moved, mixed, and shuffled between the Recreation Center (our gym) A Unit (where we were housed for quarantine), B Unit, C Unit, and D Unit. The COVID-19 virus was spreading like fire through the entire compound.

In regards to the poor access to health care here, I witnessed inmates who were getting COVID-19 symptoms, getting sick, asking for help, asking for a COVID-19 test but having to wait for days to be responded

and attended to. Then the warden would issue orders to abruptly turn off access to the phones and computers, which allowed us to e-mail, without any time of notice; to prevent all communication to our friends and family by inmates struggling with the COVID-19 virus one way or another inside the confines of prison. We were told by CO's and staff that the reason for the communication shut off was to enforce social distancing." In the prison system and more specifically by my own experience at Wasica FCI, it is absolutely impossible to social distance six feet apart let alone two feet.

I seen inmates with serious medical emergencies having to beg for help. I seen many inmates with serious medical emergencies relating to COVID-19 have to wait up to 30 minutes for acknowledgement when they struggled to breathe and desperately needed treatment.

I am now 41 years old. I have been fairly healthy throughout my life. I came out of COVID-19 as "recovered." I continue to have after affects that include muscle and lung aches, headaches, and I tire soon during normal light exercises. It's next to impossible to adequately address these issues being incarcerated.

Over the course of the past year I feel

like progress on self-improvement and opportunity is virtually non-existent. I know that money and funding makes the prison world go round, but it's at the expense of genuine rehabilitation. I've noticed the structure seems to be broken. Instead of being able to plan ahead and schedule programming into the calendar, the prison only seems able to function one day at a time. Nothing is certain.

Functionality is now a work in progress. Over the last year 2021 the focus remains on the wearing of masks instead of inmates' criminality transformation. The vision and goals are now increasing vaccination rates of the prisoners.

On October 26, 2021 the director of the Bureau of Prisons visited Waseca FCI. Michael Carvajal along with some of his staff members spent the entire day with Warden Starr and many of the staff here at Waseca. I know that many inmates were anticipating an opportunity to be able to be a voice and share some of the current issues and grievances with the director. I can only speculate, but it does seem quite obvious that those opportunities were made not possible.

I believe that was the one day that the prison was operating on the level it should be and could be. Monday through Friday, classes and programming are supposed to be in session. It's a typical day to hear cancellations being announced over the intercom and more than not it's the BED program classes that are not running. The inmates in those classes said that they attended class with no staff; only to be present. They occupied their time by playing games such as hangman rather than actually participating in an actual learning class. All jobs were operating on time. The interaction between staff and inmates became respectable and helpful. The hallways and buildings were full of activity as it would normally be expected. Since being here in Wasica, I have not seen the hallways full of inmates going to and from obligations.

"In each unit we have a daily call-out list that is an announcement for appointments to medical, psychology, classes, programming, and housing changes. On a normal day there may be about

100 call-outs. On October 26, 2021 there was 255 call-outs, mostly for education. The next day the list returned to the average 100 or so as it had been. Neither before or after that day have I seen call-outs at a number it was when the director visited this facility.

The evening of October 25, 2021 the yard crew, that is in charge of taking trash to the trash bins, was called out that evening to empty several large bags of shredded papers into the trash compactor. Those same inmates spent time later picking up shredded paper debris that had flown out into the lawn. What is an inmate supposed to think when we are called to do an abnormal job of disposing of bags and bags of shredded papers the day before the director of BOP shows up to the prison?

Because of COVID-19, programming has fell behind. I recently took the Drug Education course. The program has a 12-15 hour participation requirement. However, according to the instructor, the institution was behind and would therefore shorten the class to push more inmates through to try to

play catch up. This information was given to our class on the first day. The class was shortened to 4 sessions of 1 1/2 hours to receive a certificate that states I successfully completed a 12-15 hour Drug Education program. Is this the new post COVID-19 standard?

The BOP has a national menu that is a 5 week rotation of 3 meals per day. Throughout September and October 2021 Waseca FCI has had to modify the meals because the food that was needed was unavailable and therefore could not be served according to the menu. I understand that periodically substitutions may be necessary, but when it becomes a constant basis that is where the concern exists. At the same time commissary was out of food items for an entire month. The commissary is the prison store where, once a week, inmates can order and personally pay for hygiene, clothes, and food. The given reason was that the approval wasn't being given to the staff to place orders because of the budget. The inmates were notified in August that food items would be in shortage for commissary during the month of September. Communication

is vital for inmates to plan for change. The truth was inmates were not able to order food and had partial hygiene available until November 1, 2021. El can tell you that situations, especially that involve food, that don't come clear and correct to inmates relying on professionals, causes discord with an inmate's ability to feel safe and secure in an environment that is supposed to be properly controlled and reliable. El can testify that on October 26, 2021 the menu was complete and correct. The day before the director came to visit a communication was posted to inmates explaining that commissary was finally ordered and some things would be available in the store on the 1st of November.

The important point el want to make before concluding this article is that el have witnessed through the visit of BOP the potential Waseca FCI has in regards to day to day operation post COVID-19. El seen it myself, but only for 1 day.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons protects public safety by ensuring federal inmates receive relevant and meaningful reentry programming to support their

return to the community as law-abiding citizens. Reentry efforts increase opportunities, reduce recidivism, promote public safety, and reduce institution misconduct. To this end, the Bureau is committed to provide a robust menu of programs to address thirteen need areas for a diverse inmate population, located in 122 institutions of varying security levels across the nation.

Unfortunately, this is not the standard that is being implemented at Waseca FCI. Can we expect a better post COVID-19 era? Yes, but how do we get there?

Thank you for taking the time to read.

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