

## Notes From The Pen

By Jacob Keiter, Inmate at FCI Schuylkill

If advancing forward to a better, more productive and safer future isn't necessarily a possibility at the moment, reverting back to the way things once were would be a blessing for most of us. But exactly how easy is that going to be?

For close to a year we have heard, seen and felt the impact that COVID-19 has had on the world as a whole. Luckily, Operation Warp Speed kicked off, and groups of thousands of medical personnel gathered together to determine the safest ways for us to continue to live our daily lives, as well as work around the clock in order to develop a safe and effective vaccine for the general public to counter this terrible pandemic. In less than a year's time, not only have we been provided with one vaccine, but multiple, and even more pending approval for emergency authorization. So, what's the next step?

My lovely wife, Julie, is an essential worker at Hershey Medical Center as a medical office assistant. Lately, she has been swamped at work with excessive overtime, occurring before her regularly scheduled shift, after her shift, and even on the weekends in order to do her part in curbing this pandemic and remaining an active member of the vaccination crew. First and foremost, I am beyond proud to call her my wife for everything she is doing during this tragic time. The perception I received from her was that the vaccine was highly sought after, and that an appointment was difficult to arrange and get scheduled, due to having to follow and match up with specific lists of people ready to receive it. The prison environment isn't reacting in this same fashion.

### The Vaccine Arrives

On Tuesday, Feb. 9, the Pfizer vaccine arrived at FCI Schuylkill as well as other BOP institutions available for both inmates and staff alike to take. For the last few weeks, it was rumored that the vaccine would be arriving here soon, but never confirmed. It became a reality when medical staff came knocking door to door asking each individual if they are willing to consent to receive the vaccine. The moment I was offered the vaccine, I signed the waiver, approving that I was willing to receive it, waited in a short line, and the shot was inserted into my left arm. Instead of staff watching to see any side effects, we were simply congratulated and reported back to our cells. I felt astoundingly happy and proud that I was able to do this and be a part of the first 10 percent of Americans to receive the vaccination. Finally, things can begin to return to normal around here. I may be able to kiss my wife sooner than I once thought. Maybe. Maybe not.

After receiving my first dose of the vaccine, I went to discuss the experience with other inmates to see if they

shared the same joy and pride as myself. The responses I received were not what I was expecting to hear and some of my hope for a return to normality quickly faded. While some inmates I talked to agreed of the same soreness in the arm following the shot, the majority of the inmates I spoke with refused to receive the vaccine. Can you believe it? They turned it down! I've seen multiple images and videos of elderly people waiting in long lines for hours at a time, simply hoping to make the cut and receive a vaccine dose. We, as inmates, have an opportunity for the vaccine not only to be delivered directly to our cell doors, but also have no wait time or scheduling confusion. And these people refuse that. This not only confused me, but upset me as well.

Now I fully understand the discrepancy and the controversial issue behind the fact that inmates are being offered the vaccine this early in the rollout. Whenever I first heard the 9/11 mastermind terrorist was being offered the vaccine in Guantanamo Bay, I wasn't too happy myself. Do I believe that productive citizens in society deserve the shot at this time more than I do? Sure. Do I have any regret on taking the vaccine before these people? Absolutely not. It was readily available here, and I seized the moment. Carpe Diem.

### Keeping My Guard Up

Consider this for just a moment. Our housing situation here at the prison resembles that of a warehouse environment, literally stacking bodies on top of one another. The possibility of exposure and spreading is high here due to inadequate capabilities to properly social distance. There are many high risk and chronic care individuals here as well. Once the virus enters behind these walls, it's hard to contain, and anyone and everyone is at immediate risk.

Just a few weeks ago, there was an outbreak here at the institution that spread like wildfire, infecting over 200 inmates. That's roughly a quarter of the total population of the prison. This forced the entire prison into a lockdown, isolating all inmates and stripping all inmates of any privileges they once had. Just days after the vaccine arrived here, yet another outbreak is occurring. The measures taken this time are not as extreme, but the specific housing units that they have occurred at are on lockdown, in order to hopefully confine the virus in those specific quarters.

If you are still debating whether an inmate deserves the vaccine, remember this as well; we're human too. Yes, some of us have done bad things repeatedly, while others were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. We have been punished enough, there's no reason our health should be jeopardized to an extreme as well.

My second dose of the vaccine is scheduled for March 2. Until then, I am continuing to keep my guard up, and fully abide by and respect CDC guidelines. I hope within the very near future there's a change of mind and heart collectively amongst the inmate population, and they do decide to receive the vaccine. I'm a firm believer in the herd immunity theory, and I'm more than happy to do my part to get there.