

PRISON REPORT

Green Means Go

For three weeks in November, we experienced a relative return to normal.

by **THOMAS DONAHUE**

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On November 1, 2021, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) announced that in accordance with the COVID-19 Modified Operations Matrix, the Federal Correctional Institution in Danbury, Connecticut, had at long last achieved green status.

The Matrix, a three-tiered, color-coded system of modified operations at all BOP facilities, was implemented in August 2021, based on the recommendations of the Department of Justice and under the guidance of the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention. This aim was to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 should the virus re-enter the institution.

These color-coded tiers range in severity from red to green, with red being the most restrictive and green designating minimal modifications to institutional operations. These levels of modification are determined by staff and inmate vaccination rates, medical isolation rates, and community transmission rates.

Under the green designation, most of the restrictions implemented under prior color levels were rescinded. This meant that as of November 2, this facility had, for all intents and purposes, returned to normal operations, or as normal as we were likely to get.

To begin with, regular weekday inmate visits resumed. The plexiglass partitions were removed and instead of being limited to one-hour visits once a week, inmates could now enjoy extended visitations. Classes, recreation and meals, which had been limited to two housing units at a time, were once again opened to allow all inmates to participate at the same time.

The face-covering mandate for all indoor activities remained in place, but I agreed with the popular sentiment that it was a minor inconvenience considering the amount of relative freedom we suddenly had.

The overwhelming majority of people I spoke with at the time expressed cautious optimism regarding recent developments. Some said it felt as though a tremendous burden had been lifted off of them. I had not been alone in wondering how much longer the inmate population could tolerate being locked down.

It might be easy for those on the outside, and for most people in general, to take for granted simple pleasures such as being able to pick up a guitar for the first time in more than a year and a half. I witnessed another inmate become teary-eyed as he strummed the first tentative chords. “God,” he said to me, “you don’t know how much I’ve missed this.”

“Yes, I do,” I said to myself as I smiled at him, “yes I do.”

For many incarcerated people, religious services are a bastion of hope, a beacon of light, or a safe haven where they can relax and let their guard down among others of like mind. For me personally, it is the highlight of my week.

Imagine having the privilege to fellowship with those from whom you had suddenly been cut off and to whom you have barely had the opportunity to say hello for so long. Remember, we don't have Facebook or Zoom, so being able to sit face to face in the same room and share faith was a big deal for a lot of people.

There were also so many new faces. The past several months have seen the population change dramatically as individuals either left for home or transferred to and from other facilities. During this period of time, our inmate population stood at 867, an increase of more than 250 inmates from just a few months earlier. Most of these new inmates had only known quarantine or modified operations, so it was likely that the changes to an "open compound" took some adjustment.

Some inmates I interviewed were of the opinion that the administration of the BOP and this institution had acted too soon, and we were moving too fast. Several have said they think removing the aforementioned restrictions should have been postponed until after the holidays or even until next spring.

Initially, I could not have disagreed more. With the majority of the staff and inmates already vaccinated (and having received their booster shots as well), and the number of community cases trending downward, I felt it was high time we pushed forward toward whatever the "new normal" will look like. I myself had received the Moderna booster shot and experienced zero side effects.

Well, it is said that, "All good things must come to an end."

In the time it took to compose this report, this institution has yet again, as of November 19, returned to the yellow status of modified operations. Thus, there is no more, "open compound." Visits are back to one hour per inmate per week. No more than two housing units are allowed in any one area at the same time. All the freedom we enjoyed for the past two weeks has suddenly been snatched away, all due to a community transmission rate of 92 per 100,000 people.

So far, this most recent development has been met with mixed emotions. There is much anger and frustration over factors we cannot control.

For this institution to return to green status, the community transmission rate would have to return to below 50 per 100,000. That seems like a long way off from where we stand today. It may be next spring before we get there.

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Thomas Donahue is a writer incarcerated at the Federal Correctional Institute in Danbury, Connecticut. He is serving a 25-year sentence. In addition to writing essays about his prison experiences, he is also working on a memoir in the hope that it will help prevent others from making the same mistakes.

More by Thomas Donahue

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