

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FROM INSIDE THE WALLS

Anonymous

I am a female inmate in the state of California. I am incarcerated in the largest women's prison in the world, and only one of two dedicated women's prisons in this state. I am writing to discuss COVID-19 and my observations of this pandemic from my side of these walls.

In mid-March, all prisoners were notified that visiting would be suspended until further notice due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, prisoners here were informed that a "modified" program schedule would be implemented, and that all education, vocation, religious and self-help programming would be suspended. In short, that meant that the vast majority of women would be confined to their units. The first modified schedule that was released allowed for some evening programming (dayroom and yard) – which was wonderful for those of us who had to work during the day. That evening programming was soon eliminated because the evening meal was taking more than twice the amount of time to complete. In April, a second modified schedule was announced, but was only in place for approximately 24 hours – it was superseded by a third one, which allows for all the wings of a housing unit to be able to program for the same amount of time. Apparently, there was a discrepancy with the second schedule – a disparity between two wings – which was rectified.

On a Saturday morning in April, the institution was completely recalled with no immediate explanation. Speculation was rampant as to why the recall was occurring, and we were later informed that a staff member may have contracted COVID-19. It was announced that contact tracing was being undertaken and those who had had contact with the staff member in question would be isolated until his/her test results had been received. I was told that the following Monday afternoon, those individuals were released from quarantine.

Also in April, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation ("CDCR") announced that "cloth barrier masks" would be issued to all inmates and that inmates and staff alike would be required to wear them at all times. For inmates, "all times" means any time we are out of our rooms. Following the Saturday lockdown, I began wearing a surgical mask someone had given me as a precaution. As someone who is medically vulnerable to COVID-19 complications, I wanted to be proactive and try my best to protect myself. So, when it was announced that masks were mandatory for all, I was ahead of the game. As I write this, I am apparently still ahead of the game. I look around the dayroom where I sit and out of the 50 people who are out here at this moment, I see one other person who is wearing her mask correctly. No one else – not even the two officers on duty – have their masks covering their mouths and noses. Because I am potentially vulnerable, I take this pandemic seriously. I take this illness seriously. I do everything I can to protect myself. However, I am in the very slim minority in taking the precautions I do. I am incredibly frustrated because I don't know whether people here don't take it seriously because of hubris, willful ignorance, deliberate obtuseness, a cavalier attitude – whatever it is, the fact remains that both the virus and the attitudes toward the virus are dangerous. As other institutions have seen – and as the 15 deaths so far among California prisoners can attest – all it takes is ONE positive case to spread this lethal virus to a multitude of vulnerable people. All it took at California Institute for Women was one staff member from PIA Fabric to begin the spread to inmates... and now over 150 women have had COVID-19 and one has died. All it took for the outbreaks at some of the men's prisons was for infected men to be transferred in, and now other men have died. It literally just

takes one case, and no one here seems to understand that or respect it. In not understanding and not respecting what is happening, they put other people's lives at risk – and none of this seems to matter. Because I have an understanding of science and how viruses are transmitted, because I am never seen outside my room without my mask, because I back away from people who are closer than six feet from me, I am made to feel as if I am overreacting or panicking without cause. That can't be further from the truth.

I spoke to the acting warden of this institution as well as the captain of this facility yard in April, after the mandatory mask announcement was made. I asked what their expectations were with respect to staff wearing their masks and was told that it was mandatory for all staff to wear them, unless a staff member were alone in the officer's station. I implored them to view the surveillance footage from the housing units because I have seen how none of the "mandatory" steps are being implemented. They told me they would "handle it;" which apparently means ignoring it because literally nothing has changed in that regard.

We are offered "Sani-Guard" and multiple daily announcements are made about its availability and our need to use it. As an asthmatic who also lives with two other asthmatics, I am cautious about what chemicals are used in our room. When asked about this chemical, I was told it is a fungicide. I asked why I needed to use a fungicide for a respiratory virus – I got no response. To this day, no one can explain to me why I should use a fungicide when one of the chemicals we are normally issued literally lists on its container that it kills strains of the coronavirus.

Daily announcements are also made with respect to our need to wear our masks when we are outside of our rooms, to maintain social distancing, and if caught without wearing a mask while on the yard, how that person can be sent in and "confined to quarters" for the remainder of the day. I have heard talk about staff issuing disciplinary infractions for noncompliance with mask wearing. I actually stand behind those things – all people need to protect themselves and others. However, what I cannot stand behind in any way whatsoever is when officers threaten these things while they themselves are not wearing their masks and not employing any type of social distancing. As is beyond obvious at this point, and as most institutions have already learned, staff – whether correctional or ancillary staff – are the MAIN vectors of this and any other infection that is introduced in a controlled setting. The very fact that staff threaten us with disciplinary action while facing zero themselves, despite the risks they pose to us, is disgusting. The fact that they are not subject to disciplinary action of any kind is repulsive. The fact that nothing would happen to one of them if they were to infect hundreds of vulnerable women is revolting.

I have raised my concerns with my "inmate advisory council" members, I have raised my concerns with my housing staff, and as I outlined, I even raised these concerns with the captain and the warden. I have reached out to various prisoners' rights organizations, and I have spoken with my family and friends; one of whom has even called this institution and written her local congressperson. And... nothing has happened, nothing has changed. I write this to at least share my thoughts this one time should an outbreak begin here. Over the last week and a half, we have been advised that two different staff members have tested positive and mandatory staff testing will begin on Friday (despite the fact that this was ordered by CDCR as well as a federal court weeks ago), but... will that be too late? As we have all seen throughout the months we as a global society have been dealing with this pandemic, it just takes one case.