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CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

AT ELKTON: PART VIII.

by

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I cannot pin down with certainty what has thus far prevented a "second" wave, or sweep, of coronavirus through Elkton. The masks? Social distancing? The lockdown? Or do we still carry some resistance having already suffered the virus? I don't know. But that's not to say the virus isn't here -- it is.

There is little to note regarding the month of November. Visitation was open, for a time, with so-so participation until local, and national, conditions worsened that the BOP closed visitation once again, probably in a panic -- they should never have re-opened it but facilitated remote visitation instead.

The more noteworthy happening occurred on Nov 13th. The H13 Section had an unspecified number, but probably no more than five, cases of COVID-19. Those all likely from the hasty transfers Elkton (or the BOP, take your pick) made in August, September and October. We've been in lockdown since March 27th but now H13 was prevented from exiting the housing unit. Meals, commissary, medication were brought to them. No outside recreation, too.

As for how the infected came to be so is suspect. But I look to the transfers as the most likely cause. And testing around here is

Suspect, too. I would come to find out, through multiple sources, that 500 Elkton prisoners -- probably in Aug, Sept and Oct -- were forced (is how I would put it) onto the New Jersey federal prison facility at Ft. Dix. 100 at a time, 25 to a bus, for seven or eight hours' drive through the night from Ohio to New Jersey.

I'm not sure what Ft. Dix's population count was in late- to-early 2019/2020, but at Elkton the FCZ was over 2,000 and FSL was over 450. By November of 2020 it would be around 1,100 at the FCZ and 340 at the FSL (note the focus on reducing the pop number at the FCZ but not the FSL). I do know the pop count at Ft. Dix for Oct/Nov of 2020: FCI - over 2,500, and at the camp - over . Elkton in order to relieve itself of over crowding cut its pop in half and dumped the excess, if you will, on to an already crowded facility.

And there's more. People at Ft. Dix got sick. With coronavirus. As I understand it, while being transferred to Ft. Dix some of the Elkton prisoners had obvious symptoms. After a two-week quarantine period at Ft. Dix (as I understand it) formerly Elkton prisoners tested positive for the virus. And it spread through the compound, to the point that the general population started making threats against the new arrivals. So they couldn't go into general population. They stayed in quarantine, 65 to a unit, sharing two TVs, one phone, two computers, I believe.

That was the "hitch" I had been anticipating; it happening in secret -- to some extent (pretty bad when the warden [Ft. Dix] and Governor [NJ] both have to come out and say they would not be accepting anymore transfers into the prison) -- throughout Oct.

But back to Elkton, later on in Nov, the single bunks in all of

The three-men cubicles were taken out, leaving the double bunks, making the cubicles two-men cubicles. At the FSL I'm not aware that there were actually three people to a cubicle, but there may have been. Anyway, in what was the best circumstance to ~~set~~ distance ourselves within the three-mens, by using the two "bottom" bunks, we now had to share the double bunk, effectively living over top of one another. And the "freed" space goes unused. I think it was more conv to remove the single than to trim the double. But their point was to help in "social distancing" by reducing the number of people in a cubicle -- though there hadn't been a need, but it looks good on paper, I'm sure, to show you've taken some kind of action, even if it makes little sense.

At some point in the middle of Nov, Monday through Friday on only the lunch meal, our clam shells are now brought to us. No explanation for this course of action given. Nothing new there.

And starting late in Nov and carrying through all of Dec, we were harassed, almost nonstop, about our masks. Masks that are uncomfortable to wear and are porous. They say it's for safety, that it's not a punishment yet they only seem to be able to administer any such thing as a you-here-no-choice-and-if-you-do-not-comply-you-will-be-punished attitude, or perspective. That's all anything ever comes down to: bark orders and punish.

There have been a few promises concerning availability of the vaccine but no date volunteered. I don't believe there is one because I don't believe the BOP has much control over whose vaccine they receive, or when, or for whom. Nothing makes much sense when it comes to the BOP, though. Take their extra insistence that a mask be worn at all times outside of the cubicles -- even while outside at rec. Who knows by what delineation they're constructed to dictate

where "safe" space is. They must have used their existing policy defining of what constitutes a "common area" and doesn't. Making BOP policy -- which probably never bothered to take in to account viral spread -- with CDC guidance.

I've stated it till I'm blue in the face: everything in a prison is shared space, even if it comes down to air-flow space. It does not matter in a cluster of cubies with corridors beside them when a mask is worn or not, we are all moving the air around, we are all breathing that air.

December would see a few noteworthy-ish updates to provide here. One, the Associate Warden's Department yet again posted the same eight, old, information sheets about COVID-19. Medical posted four sheets encouraging us to get vaccinated -- though it's not even here yet to be made available, he received a green envelope to keep all of our recent paper work in -- part of the First Step Act. The envelope, apart from ~~be~~ being handy to hold things, is useless.

And we've received no updates concerning Coronavirus, the lockdown, or any related topic from the warden in the form of a memo. Apparently it takes a federal court, news media and ACLU to encourage such communication.

That said, a surprising new thing is now available: a quarterly BOP prison-specific newsletter! Yay. And we're able to contribute to it. Oh boy. Do you think they will accept this essay, folks? Nah, me either. Oh, and the isolation of H1B was lifted in mid-Dec.

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