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COVID-19 UPDATE MARCH 23, 2020

I have been monitoring the impacts of the COVID-19 virus on the Corrections system and will continue to provide you with updates on a periodic basis as new information becomes available. This is the most recent update as of 10:00 a.m. on Monday, March 23, 2020.

Both staff and prisoners are understandably experiencing heightened anxiety due to the uncertainty of this pandemic. It will be critical for both staff and prisoners to continue taking steps to mitigate the possibility of exposure by following the established protocols and working together for the health and safety of everyone.

This is an extremely fluid situation with changes sometimes happening hourly, so the responses of the MDOC will likely continue to evolve as the landscape changes.

MDOC Employees Test Positive

Three MDOC employees have tested positive for COVID-19 as of this writing. I have previously reported two of those: a Jackson County Probation Agent and a Corrections Officer assigned to the Detroit Detention Center located at the former Mound Correctional Facility and under contract with the City of Detroit for booking and detaining arrestees of the Detroit Police Department. It is unlikely either of these MDOC employees had any contact with the prisoner population or anyone associated with a MDOC correctional facility. A number of MDOC employee coworkers of these individuals are self-isolating for the CDC endorsed 14-day time frame as a precaution.

A third MDOC employee who works at the Thumb Correctional Facility in Lapeer tested positive for COVID-19 on Saturday, March 21. This employee had not worked at the facility since March 16. However, the MDOC began the process of identifying other employees and prisoners who may have been in contact with the positive employee to begin the 14-day self-quarantine.

MDOC employees would usually self-quarantine in their homes. Some staff at other MDOC locations have reported they are self-quarantining due to travel or potential contact with a COVID exposed person in the community.

The MDOC reports that staff attendance has been solid during this time.

Prisoner Tests Positive

The MDOC reported today, Monday, March 23, that a prisoner who was originally housed at the Kinross Correctional Facility has tested positive for COVID-19. The prisoner was taken to an outside hospital for an unrelated medical condition on March 11 and has not been at the facility since that day. The prisoner was not initially tested for COVID-19 by the hospital, but was transferred to a different hospital a week later and placed on a floor with other members of the public who were being tested for COVID-19. The prisoner was tested by that hospital on March 17, which sent the prisoner's sample to be tested three days later. The MDOC was told the prisoner had tested positive on Sunday, March 22.

The MDOC has made arrangements to transport the prisoner to the Duane Waters Health Center inside the Egeler Reception and Guidance Center in Jackson once he is released by the outside hospital. He will be placed in a special isolation room to continue treatment and recovery. The MDOC has a protocol in place for the safety of the staff and prisoners at the prison health center to prevent the spread of this illness.

The MDOC began notifying staff at the Kinross and Chippewa Correctional Facilities who had contact with the prisoner during his supervision at the hospitals Sunday night, March 22, advising them they will need to self-quarantine for 14 days since their last contact with the prisoner.

Screening

All MDOC staff are being screened on a daily basis and have been for the last week to try to prevent COVID-19 from getting into the facility. Any staff showing symptoms are removed from the facility if already onsite or denied entrance. The MDOC is complying with CDC recommendations not to issue gloves or masks as a preventative measure. At least one MDOC employee was denied entrance to a prison because the employee wanted to wear personal protection equipment (gloves in this case). These are supplies needed for healthcare workers and confirmed positive patients. Additionally, staff wearing PPE's into the prison could increase anxiety or induce panic among prisoners and fellow employees.

Prisoners who exhibit symptoms are being screened as well.

Testing

The MDOC has testing kits at every prison, but must presently get permission from a county or state health authority to order a COVID-19 test before it can be administered. As the availability of testing kits increases, this protocol could change to permit broader testing at a later date. Without the ability to test everyone, the MDOC is screening prisoners and staff based on the symptoms associated with COVID-19: cough, sore throat, and elevated temperature of 100.4 or above.

If a prisoner is identified with potential symptoms of COVID-19, the prisoner would be immediately isolated along with anyone who had close contact with the prisoner. Prison health care staff would request permission from a county or state health authority to test the prisoner, conducting the test and sending it to an outside lab once approved. The symptomatic prisoner would be kept in isolation until the test results are received.

Consistent with the current community approach, close contacts to the symptomatic individual will be isolated but will not be tested unless they become symptomatic as well.

Quarantining/Isolating Prisoners

As indicated above under testing, a symptomatic prisoner is isolated from the rest of the prisoner population pending approval of testing and confirmed testing results. Increased cleaning is also continuing part of the plan to try to limit exposure.

Prisoners with close contact to a symptomatic prisoner would be kept isolated from the rest of the prisoner population, but away from the symptomatic prisoner. MDOC staff with contact would be monitored and sent home or denied entry if they exhibit symptoms.

The MDOC has advised me that it is exploring all options for quarantining large numbers of symptomatic and positive prisoners if that becomes necessary. The initial response is to not lock down complete housing units, but rather to isolate symptomatic prisoners and close contacts to them as directed by local health officials. For example, this could include moving symptomatic prisoners to specific cells in a housing unit wing and placing close contacts in a different wing. If the numbers of symptomatic or positive prisoners were to increase, it could result in isolating those individuals in an entire housing unit or perhaps prison.

The MDOC assures me planning is occurring based on changing scenarios and it will be prepared if a significant number of isolation or treatment beds become necessary.

Staff are self-isolating in their homes.

Social Distancing

Social distancing to the extent recommended for the general public is extremely difficult to achieve inside prison. The majority of Michigan's prisons house double the prisoner population they were originally designed to hold. There are 2 prisoners per cell in most of the conventional cellblocks and housing units, and 6 to 8 prisoners per cubicle in the open bay prisons.

However, the MDOC has taken a number of precautions to try to limit exposure to COVID-19 by educating prisoners and staff and making operational changes. MDOC reports that both institutional staff and prisoners have been provided with multiple rounds of guidance regarding social distancing, that is, maintaining a 6-foot barrier from others whenever possible.

Prisons are on a modified operational plan to reduce and limit contact including the following areas:

- reducing the sizes of programming and education groups
- spreading out meal schedules by limiting 2 prisoners per table
- avoid unnecessary congregating inside housing units and on the yard
- controlling prisoner movement inside and outside of housing units based on the unique physical layout of each prison while trying to maintain as many operations as possible to promote normalcy and engage prisoners since the COVID-19 response is for an unknown duration
- volunteer programs and face-to-face college programming has been suspended
- healthcare has been modified to limit prisoners congregating
- many gate pass prisoners are laid in to limit their potential contact with the public

Soap Availability

Prison staff have been instructed repeatedly to make soap continuously available to prisoners. There is no set amount of how much soap a prisoner can get. Staff Facility have been told to make soap available to any prisoners requesting it. Staff are also supposed to make sure the soap dispensers in prisons with community bathrooms are kept filled.

The MDOC has advised me that it has enough soap and cleaning supplies for an extended period of time. Michigan State Industries (MSI), MDOC's manufacturing component, makes soap and sanitizers and is increasing production. MDOC reports it has sufficient inventories at this time to take care of its needs and correctional facilities have been told to place future orders because the duration of the COVID-19 protocol is unknown.

Contact with Loved Ones

Visiting prisoners is still prohibited. All volunteer services have been suspended as well.

The telephone vendor has provided prisoners with two five-minute telephone calls per week for free so prisoners can stay in touch with loved ones.

The email vendor has provided prisoners with two free e-stamps a week for prisoners to send emails to loved ones.

Both incoming and outgoing regular mail is being processed and delivered.

Paroles

The Parole Board will continue to conduct parole interviews via video conference as scheduled and continue to make parole release decisions.

The MDOC will continue to process paroles and release prisoners as scheduled at this time.

Parole Board public hearings for a small number of life sentence cases have been postponed.