

March 28, 2020

TO: The Michigan Humanities Collaboratory
% Carceral State Project (Conditions Team)

FROM: Jack S. Copeman, PCAP Contributor

Re: Self-Initiated Initiative Reports of the
COVID-19 Experience within the MDOC

Dear Reader,

It has never been easy to be incarcerated. Prisons are loud, abusive, dirty and disgusting places that are filled with sociopaths and mental defectives. And yet, human resilience is truly amazing when you realize just how we, as a species, can adapt to even the most horrendous of circumstance and environments. But now with the threat of a highly-contagious and potentially lethal virus spreading across the nation, the terms and conditions of imprisonment have changed for those who are elderly and for those with underlying medical conditions.

Proving once and for all how cheap and worthless a life becomes once American Society

labels you a criminal and puts you behind bars. The justice system in this country clearly demonstrating its own hypocrisy.

Hello! This is the beginning of an essay that I'm considering to produce for MOR and their ~~re~~ call for submissions. And the purpose of including it here is to make an introduction and to propose a writing idea that I have for your Carceral Project. As I did write and offer my assistance a while ago. Filling out or answering the questions regarding length and the various prisons I've been confined to. You may want to check your files, I should be in there somewhere.

My idea? I propose to send you a running update of what the MDOC, through its agents here at Saginaw Correctional (SRF), are up to during the great Coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

As I am not really sure if there is anyone currently left in your office, answering the phone or reading the mail during this time of plague, so my thought is to write as situations develop. Reporting on what actions and measures, the attitudes and feelings of prisoners and staff, as well as any

Other observations I witness and experience along the way. Dropping one of these in the box over the next several weeks so as to provide a view of what it's like for us. Maybe my ambition will last, maybe it won't. However, I will at least try until the illness reaches my door and my immune system resolves it or I succumb and turn into a zombie. (Where I shall then immediately leap off the bed and begin attacking hospital people so as to start the apocalypse.) Ha ha ha!

Yeah, o.k., maybe that last part was unnecessary, but again, I told you that prisons are filled with "sociopaths", right? Oh, and by the way, my writing style is a tad quirky anyway, so expect more of that if you truly want me to be honest.

So here goes my first installment that I would like to title:

3/28/20

Installment 1

IF I DIE IN A CORRECTIONS ZONE (One)

It is Sunday, March 29, 2020, and my mind keeps thinking, is it just me or did anyone else ever imagine that this year,

this decade, would begin so horribly? Sure we were distracted with the Impeachment of Donald Trump and the in-fighting between Democrats but still... the news was there. Had been all along with the first reports out of China. Then again, back when media coverage was like about 30-seconds of quick story before moving on to something else. Until the next day and the next with the spreading onto cruise ships, Americans quarantined for weeks, flown back to the States and sequestered on military installations. There were cases of death from the beginning, but speaking for myself, as someone confined to a Correctional facility in mid-Michigan, even this fact seemed about as abstract as modern art. But weeks turned into months where each day the Coronavirus stories received more and more coverage, killing more people, getting closer and closer. Spreading quite easily. Showing us our vulnerabilities, our arrogance, our lack of competent leadership and planning, but worst of all—as pointed out in a Country with the most material wealth—a shocking, appalling, disturbing shortage of equipment and supplies. This, by far, will no doubt be the greatest lesson that comes out of all of this. I have the greatest confidence we will indeed

learn the hard way. And we will now that the body count is growing! Unfortunately, that's our method.

Meanwhile, here at ground-level, I began journaling notes about how the MDOC plans to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic. As the threat edged ever closer, we finally received the first notification on the J-Pay electronic messaging and music catalog/downloading kiosk conveniently installed (2 per) in each housing unit. Dated 3/13/20, and addressed from some mysterious source labelled "J-Pay Representative", the text tells us of Governor Whitmer's declared state of emergency. Informing us back when there were just 12 confirmed cases, stating their intentions as:

[Direct Quote]

(3/13/20)

The Department of Corrections has implemented its initial COVID-19 response plan and is continuing to work in conjunction with the SEOC on future planning to combat the illness. The focus of this plan is to keep everyone within our facilities safe, but this will cause disruptions to normal activities. The most immediate impact will be a suspension of visits at select MDOC facilities with high risk populations until further notice. It is important

that accurate information is shared during this response, so this will be the first of many updates to all offenders within the MDOC.

Other headings include:

- Current Update, no identified cases of Coronavirus in MDOC facilities.

- Healthcare

- Common symptoms include: Fever, Cough, Shortness of Breath

- Enhanced Screening for Visitors, Staff, and Contractors

- Information Sharing

Of course this was the first message. There have been two or three others that describe the first MDOC (known) employee to contract the virus and the latest update to inform of at least four (also known) prisons where it has now appeared. Believe they are Lapeer (Thumb Corr.), Lakeland in Coldwater, Parnell Road and one in the

Upper Peninsula at Kincheloe. I find this Upper Management position of "information sharing" very refreshing as opposed to their usual stance of silence and misdirection.

So the MDOC officially began their "response plan" with canceling all outside visits with family, friends and outside guests. Next, they re-introduced bleach back into the facilities in the effort to disinfect surfaces. Actually making the porters do their jobs thoroughly. Even in the dining hall or chowhall, kitchen-workers are compelled to wipe down tables, usually ignored, with sanitizer. During this period, the prison administration began to experiment with running chow lines; normally a quick routine of calling each individual housing unit on a rotating basis of order; ~~now~~ calling the first half of a 240-man unit to chow, pouring in to eat by standing in a long line, getting a tray, finding an open seat with three other prisoners that you either like or can stand to be around - and then chewing your meal down as quickly as possible before being badgered and harassed to get out by guards circling around the tables. ~~All~~ All the while trying to enjoy pitifully

Substandard food that is continuously served over and over again, that is what a meal is like in prison. And if you don't like it, you can always buy your own nutritionally empty food from the over-priced store. That is, of course, if you can afford it.

Now, as I was stating, some experimentation was underway with the whole notion of "social-distancing" in mind. Well... quite obviously this idea is practical for free-world citizens but inside, it's going to prove nearly impossible to apply. As the inherent nature of confinement in America is to cram as many inmates in together as possible. Packing us into tighter and tighter spaces, for instance, the "dormitory-style" pole-barns the MDOC uses to house prisoners contains 8-man cubicles that were originally intended for half that number. This is part of the reason the state's Corrections Department is no longer a member of the American Correctional Association (ACA). Having refused to comply with their basic principle of reducing overcrowding. So the MDOC lost their accreditation nearly 10-years ago and hasn't cared about it ever since. But with every doctor and epidemiologist on

the planet calling for humans to spread out and stay away from each other, even a stubborn government agency that believes their business is about punishment and they don't have to follow any policies but their own, unless otherwise ordered by a court, even they know they must make some attempt at reducing transmission. And where do the various housing units interact with each other the most? Either on the Big Yard or the chowhall.

The yard adjustment was fairly easy. They just kept barking at us to maintain a 6-foot distance. Which, everyone promptly ignored. But when it came to trying running a longer approach to the running of chow lines, well... it went as expected. Meaning: the Yard Sergeant called the first wing (out of four per housing unit) which is roughly 60 individuals in 30 cells or rooms. Having everyone spread out at different tables, eat quickly while still rushed, wait until the entire chowhall was emptied and wiped down before calling for the next wing. So it would be A-Wing, ⁸⁰⁰unit, go eat, come back, B-Wing same thing and so forth. Once 800 was done, they called for 900-Unit with the same procedure.

This went on until every housing unit was fed and then the regular routine schedule called for yard time. However, with the longest delay that I have ever experienced during my 28-29 years of imprisonment, this new trial run threw off the schedule so much that there was literally no time left to run any yard at all! In fact, within a couple of more hours, it was almost time to begin running the next meal. So that experiment was scrapped after only two days.

Now the approach ~~is~~ has gone completely the other way. Now we are being squeezed into one-half of the chowhall at a time, packed in until every available seat is filled. While kitchen workers quickly wipe down tables on the other half of the building, the prisoners having just eaten and left.

On 3/29/2020, the MDOC issued a text stating they have secured testing kits "so the prison population who meet the criteria can be tested quickly." Which is a sentence that I find troubling at best. As I wonder why the Department isn't being more aggressive with the prevention of the virus from entering its facilities instead?

Not relying on quarantine once it is already in the prison says to me that this is the typical attitude I'm having to deal with—yet again.

The e-message dated 3/25/20, informs us of several prisoners across the state. The text outlining their new testing system typically provides them with an answer within 48 hours. Further stating that cotton face masks are provided to prisoners on "close contact status" and for use by staff having to supervise them.

Ending the message with, "As you talk with your friends and family, please encourage them to visit the department's website at Michigan.gov/corrections and click on the 'Coronavirus update' banner at the top of the page.

There they will find up-to-date information about what the MDOC is doing in response to this issue, as well as a question and answer section that hopefully should address common concerns and questions that have come up."

And finally there is another message from 3/26/20 that notifies us about new cases at Macomb, Woodland, and Women's Huron

Valley Correctional facilities. Also informing us that the Michigan Supreme Court and Court of Appeals have suspended deadlines for appeals by Executive Order 2020-21. The rest of the message repeats what they have already said about the importance of sharing information because "misinformation and rumors will only slow the efforts of public health and corrections officials to slow the spread of Coronavirus."

So...

With all that being said, I shall end this first installment of what I hope evolves into a collaborative effort to report, describe, explain and understand the conditions that we, the prisoners, are now experiencing within the confines of the MDOC. We need a voice and this is my intention.

Thank you very much for your time in this matter. On my behalf and others, it is much appreciated for sure.

Sincerely,

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