

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

FROM: Jack S. Copeman

Re: Self-Initiated Initiative - The Corona-
Virus Experience within the MDOC

Dear Reader,

Over the course of the past six weeks, I have been engaged in noting, observing, and documenting the conditions of incarceration as they develop here at SRF (Saginaw Corr. Facility). Reporting what has been witnessed from the perspective of a participant-observer, a prisoner, living in a high-risk situation during the height of a extremely contagious pandemic. These are my COVID-19 dispatches. Created to inform, enlighten, educate, maybe even to entertain—with the natural absurdity of the MDOC—and the things that they do. Enjoy.

If I Die In A Corrections Zone...
(Six)

(Wed. 4/29/20) In my last installment, I was explaining why two prisons (Coldwater and Cotton) are now experiencing an explosion of coronavirus cases. First, because Lakeland (LCF) is an open area prison with no individual cells to provide any sort of protection from an airborne pathogen. The floor plan, open-dorms with beds spaced an arms length away from each other is probably the last place you want to be during ~~an~~ a pandemic. Someone coughs or sneezes on the other side of the room gets launched into the air, where large circulating fans ~~pick~~ push it around the entire building. This is why there are mini-outbreaks of the cold and flu at least two or three times a year in a prison setting.

In fact, I caught an upper and lower respiratory infection this past February. As it started in my sinuses and then spread to my chest, I developed a harsh, productive cough that left me short of breath and choking at times. These attacks came at various times, during the day, early morning, middle of the night. Waking me and my bunkie up. So I submitted a Health Care Medical Request (a kite) complaining about my cough and after waiting for a week or so, received an appointment. This lag-time varies usually, anywhere between 1-2 weeks for an initial assessment. By then most of our

Symptoms tend to self-resolve. When we are finally placed on call-out to see the nurse, this exam ~~is~~ consists of the recording of vital stats; a quick check in the ears nose and throat before we get the typical brush-off. As I was told during my appointment in February that "the crud is going around right now." "That we don't have Mucinex on the formulary." But what about my congestion? I asked. To which I was told to drink plenty of fluids, but to avoid caffeine. And to get plenty of rest. The nurse further adding that she had a cough for the past month herself. Seriously. This is the typical patten between health care staff and prisoners.

Meanwhile I had to take Tylenol and Alka-Seltzer tablets purchased from the Keefe Store.

And the second reason places such as Coldwater and Cotton, and Parnell and Huron Valley Women's' facilities are blowing-up with the virus is simply because the staff working at these locations are not vigilant nor diligent in keeping the germ out. It's as plain as that.

In a series of newspaper articles, the Lansing State Journal has written about the prison system in this state and their handling of the crisis.

Related to this topic, an article titled:

Prison workers want emergency bargaining, reports:

Union files grievance over compensation

Additionally, the Michigan Corrections Officers (MCO) has filed a grievance arguing prison employees should be paid overtime for the time they spend before each shift being screened for the novel coronavirus.

People who work inside prisons must show up 10 minutes before each shift to fill out a questionnaire about symptoms and to have their temperatures taken.

This same article further states: (heading)

Michigan has not ordered early release of prisoners

and another heading

Michigan prisoners still sleeping in close quarters

LSJ.COM Saturday, April 18, 2020, 5A.

There's also an article in the Lansing State Journal that is headlined: Michigan prison is hotspot for coronavirus

Which is an in-depth comprehensive report on the material mentioned here and in previous letters.

Beginning the piece by writing:

A Michigan prison that's emerged as a hotspot for coronavirus cases has a rate of infection that exceeds jail systems in New York City and Chicago, both have garnered national attention as large sources of the outbreak.

At Parnall Correctional Facility near Jackson, 10% of prisoners and 21% of staff have tested positive for COVID-19, according to a Detroit Free Press analysis of Department of Corrections data.

Staff Writers Angie Jackson and Kristi Tanner
LSJ.COM Sunday, April 19, 2020 9A

(Fri 5/1/20) The Latest Stats. Gov. Whitmer appeared in a Town-Hall Meeting yesterday. Taking questions from news anchors that were selected from thousands of concerned citizens. As I've watched more than a few of these things now, it is becoming readily apparent to me that she isn't the best public speaker. At times fumbling with her standard answers: "We have flattened the curve but we need to maintain the course."

Which is a statement that I really wonder

if it's true or not. As I have been tracking these figures, ~~and~~ they read:

4/20/20 — 32,000 positive cases — 2,469 deaths
 *6 weeks since the first case in Michigan

4/27/20 — 38,000 " " — 3,400 deaths

4/29/20 — 40,399 " " 3,620 deaths

4/30/20 — 41,379 " " 3,789 deaths

5/1/20 — 42,356 " " 3,800 deaths

And as far as the MDOC keeping prisoners posted on the latest information, well... I've had my doubts about this promise from the very beginning. Again, knowing the private and secretive nature of the Department after nearly 30-years of association, having gone through the great CAIN lawsuit where prison officials were exposed for their arrogance and defiance of court orders; having filed plenty of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to find out things I needed to know contained within my own records — well... again — I was surprised that the MDOC was ostensibly willing to share what they know, ~~and~~ what they learned, and most of all

What they were doing about the coronavirus epidemic? In one of their first communications, they said this would be part of their "Response plan," in fact, they begin each message with:

The Michigan Department of Corrections is committed to providing the prisoner population with up-to-date information as it relates to our efforts in dealing with the coronavirus disease 2019.

And then they go into their headings and topics.

Subjects such as positive tests, how many, where.

How many employees had become infected and where they worked. How many deaths there have been.

Recovery. Where these prisoners are being transferred to. Setting up phone numbers for family to contact to keep from overwhelming their telephone lines.

And yet there are some things that the MDOC is hesitant to reveal or discuss. For example, they have only mentioned a total number of prisoners that tested positive one time. Three weeks ago!

At that time there were 300 but that figure has changed dramatically. As I waited and waited for this to be adjusted, I finally had to reach out to Matt Tjapkes, President, Humanity for Prisoners at Grand Haven, MI,

to provide me with answers to my questions. He responds by writing:

"As of today (4/29/20), 1,395 positive cases with 30 officially recovered. There are also 261 confirmed staff cases..."

I may have to rely on him some more if this current trend with the Department continues. Matt's phone is (616) 935-0075 if you have any questions about his organization and their function, please don't hesitate to call and learn more.

Yard Schedule Change. Here at SRF, the Warden, O.T. Winn, has sent us an email to inform that this facility has been chosen to receive recovered level-4 prisoners. From where exactly we do not know, as the Department must be making all types of adjustments to ~~accommodate~~ accommodate the growing number of infected. Re-Opening units that have been shuttered must be a logistical challenge. But the MDOC is always improvising anyway—so this is nothing new for them.

So now that level-4 is changing, so is the yard schedule. Starting Monday, (5/24/20), level-4 will get all of the morning yard, from 7:30 - 10:30.

For those of us in Level-11, we lose the Big Yard, where the track and weight-pit ~~are~~ are located, so this is no small inconvenience.

We will now be scheduled after morning count clears at 11:15 until 15:15 (3:15 pm).

Apparently this is appeasement as there are too many fights, assaults, and other violent acts attributed to a higher level of confinement. Thus, the administration here wants to try an experiment to see if they can alleviate some of it. See how this works out for them (prisoners and staff) as time reveals all.

* There are two new JPay Representative messages (Sat. 5/2/20) on the kiosk. The first one is about the 400 positive test results and 900 negatives at ~~that facility~~. G. Robert Cotton Correctional Facility in Jackson. This is the 2nd largest outbreak in the MDOC. Again, it is a large, open-area pole barn domicile.

*** The other message states that the Department is "partnering with the Michigan National Guard to begin facility-wide testing for COVID-19 at our facilities in the Upper Peninsula beginning Monday."

It appears they are bringing in the Army to test every prisoner at six facilities!

Baraga, Alger, Marquette, Newberry, Chippewa and Kinross. The message goes on to describe these "teams" as they travel and that how this proactive measure is to our benefit. As knowing who is positive and negative will allow them "to provide the appropriate monitoring and care you need."

The type of test is a nasal swab and will take ~~a~~ 48 hours to receive a result. It states that if we receive a positive test that we will be "personally notified of the result by healthcare staff." I have no doubt about that.

This message also provides:

If you refuse a COVID-19 test, you will be considered a **PTI** (person under investigation) and will be isolated until you either agree to the testing, or for 14 days, at which time you will be reevaluated by health care staff.

Looks like the MDOC is gonna go hard. This ain't the first time I've seen this. Been here before, back in 2011 when Gov. Snyder signed the DNA registration law into effect, I was at Cotton Correctional (of all places) when they called me at MIDNIGHT, to go to the Control Center where I was given an

ultimatum. Either I was going to allow them (the MDOC + State of Michigan) to swab my cheek for DNA, or they were going to write a Disobeying A Direct ~~to~~ Order (DDO), a Major misconduct, against anyone who refused.

Further telling us that refusals would be called back the next day to be given the same choice over and over until that person had accumulated enough tickets to raise their security level. From there, anyone still refusing would be sent to Maximum security. Where you lose property that you can't have (personal clothing, sweats, limited books, no boots); where there are no jobs, so you're locked down, other than an hour or two for yard; where you're given five-minute showers.

I know, I did my first ten-years in prison in max. Been there done that and wasn't looking to go back... So when they said open up, I didn't really have a problem with it. After all, I will eventually have to submit just prior to release anyway. It's a law, felony offenders are placed on CODIS.

This is how the system gets its way. Whatever it takes to ensure compliance, the MDOC has a long handle and they turn it whenever

they need to make sausage. And usually there is no recourse in the courts, no aid from watch groups, no sympathy from the public. The American ethic of contempt for the incarcerated is complete. That's how it is for us, you know. That's life at the bottom.

As we begin this first week of May, 2020, with the total cases in the U.S. at 1,156,924 while deaths nearing 70,000—it is important to remember that we are only nearing midpoint of the pandemic. That's it! There's still a long way to go yet. And the people are growing restless—they want out—and as I sit here watching them hold their protest rallies, you can really tell that they no longer care. Anyone but a prisoner is surprised by this attitude. But not us, we've been living with it ever since stepping across the correctional threshold. The rest of the Country is ^{just} seeing it being applied to them now—and they're appalled by such behavior.

Hmm... I'm just wondering how they like the taste of this pie? As I mail this one out and return back to my notes.

I remain in struggle.

Jack S. Copeman

5/3/20