

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

FROM: Jack S. Copeman

Re: Self-Initiated Initiative, the Coronavirus
Pandemic—Notes No. 5

Dear Reader,

In my continuing project to observe and record the latest goings-on behind the blue and orange curtain of the MDOC, I am forwarding another dispatch to you so that you may learn something from this experience. These are my coronavirus pandemic Notes from a prisoner, writing with the intention to inform. May these words either stunt your moral growth or tickle your prostate into dropping the ropes. As the ship gets underway. Likewise. Another episode.

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

(Mon. 4/20/20) It has been five weeks now since the MDOC stopped all visits and guests from entering their prisons. To make up for even more isolation from the outside world, prison officials were able

to arrange two free five-minute phone calls per week from their phone vendor (Global-Tel Link) and two free e-message "stamps" from our music and email vendor (iPlay). This arrangement was clearly designed to appease us for the loss of direct contact by making it possible to contact our friends and families via other means.

And yet nothing can really replace nor compensate us for the severed connection with our loved ones. As some states around the country and even various county jails have video visits, available for their prisoners via kiosks to computer. This technology is available but has never been approved within the MDOC. So as a result of this pandemic, we are trying to organize a grassroots movement to get this into the facility so that we can at least see our loved ones. Such an adjustment would only be decent and humane during such a period when death is stalking and lurking for the foreseeable future. Who knows if we will be able to see them again? Or vice-versa?

Will have to see if we can get some traction with this. Hopefully this is doable and we can find a champion to represent us out there.

In another grassroots movement seeking relief from Michigan's abnormally long sentencing structure, a fellow incarcerated veteran put together a good-time restoration proposal called the Michigan Prison Restoration Credits Act (MPRCA) that has just been certified by the Secretary of State. This is something that he's been working on for the better part of a year now. Put together with the help of many free-society individuals, "Legal Mike" nearly had all his efforts and hopes dashed by the pandemic. As this group was at the distribution of handouts and collection of signatures stage when social distancing became a thing. So everything was almost all for naught but for a judge's decision to make a special dispensation on this point. Apparently they had ~~have~~ collected enough signatures at this point that this initiative will make it on the ballot. Look for it this fall.

As of the latest JPay MDOC update (4/19/20), they state that there are "16 positive cases identified and 18 negative test results."

Which leads me to wonder why the reporting of negative test results is even relevant or important at all to us? In fact, I find such a

column to be a distraction, a red herring against more germane topics such as how many prisoners, in total, are now infected with COVID-19? This statistic was last given at 300 on the 10th of April. It was the first and only time to have been reported to us. From what I hear, there is a new message on the kiosk that I haven't been able to download to my tablet/music player yet.

Cable news, I have never watched so much CNN, C-SPAN and the BBC on PBS as I have since the start of the American spread of coronavirus. But it's true. As I have a vested interest with so many factors and conditions against me, it would only be wise to stay informed and educate myself in the process.

^(Sat)
^(4/18) This is how I learned that Ohio prisons have reported over 1,300 cases in their prisons. Inmates being told to sleep head-to-toe, which sounds ludicrous, and to cover their mouths when they cough and sneeze. Also, that disinfectant was now being utilized to clean surfaces. Something the whole planet has been practicing for months now - is just catching on in the Ohio system. Gee, that's swell.

(Tue. 4/21) In Michigan, the current numbers are 32,967 infected or positive with 2700 deaths. As I am literally sandwiched between two hot spots, Flint at nearly 2,000 and Saginaw at 800 or so—and growing daily! It amazes me that there hasn't been an outbreak in here yet. (None that I know of anyway.)

A personal observation. To me it doesn't seem to be a question of if but when, so when it does happen, it will catch on as gasoline to a pile of straw. For I look around and see groups of prisoners ~~outside~~ gathered together playing poker—having been chased outside by the new scheduling of dayrooms—they crowd together. Not observing any type of social distance whatsoever. There is still hugging, handshaking, whispering and sitting close together. When asked about it, there appears to be two different mindsets: indifference and fatalistic. As the former ~~is~~ makes up roughly 95% of our population, the pandemic is nothing more than another means of harassment, another opportunity to screw up the regular schedule. So they are quick to complain, gripe, and display a lot of boisterous bravado. These are the same individuals that don't wash their hands thoroughly or as much as they should.

They don't wear their masks properly and they certainly don't pay attention to the news or try to stay informed. Not even bothering to read the MDOC updates, they just delete them as soon as they appear. I know this is true because I take random samples and ask.

This is a pervasive attitude. Which for myself, being in the concerned 5%—find really distressing and dangerous.

Speaking of the latter, there is a small faction of prisoners that are truly involved with self-care, self-awareness, and self-discipline during this time of plague and change. We believe that it's inevitable, after all the CDC did state that up to 80% of the Country will come down or be exposed to the virus. So we are doing the best we can when it comes down to our limited abilities. Mostly washing our hands ad-nauseum; voluntarily isolating ourselves; wearing masks properly and maintaining social distancing as possible. We recognize the value of information and choose to learn the facts by listening to experts, following the science without regard to any political agenda.

(Wed. 4/22) I just received a letter from PCAF's

Interim Director, Nora K. It's addressed to the "PCAP Community" which includes artists and writers and workshop participants.

She informs that the first copies of *Songs Unsung: Michigan Review of Creative Writing, Vol. 12* has been received from the printer. Although the Review launch event had to be postponed, maybe later in the fall, she does note "This year's volume has truly wonderful writing..." And hopefully "the wider public will have access to these poems, stories, and essays."

I mention this here and now because I have a few contributions in Vol. 12. So you can find more of my stuff there if you're interested.

* While watching tonight's local news, they had a piece on there about the latest stats in the MDOC. There are now 600 confirmed cases of COVID-19 to include 25 deaths. Those are the latest figures.

A total that the Department has been failing to mention in their so-called COVID-19 response plan—to include information sharing—which is becoming a problem. It seems to me that as events continue to unfold and the number of casualties climbs, prison authorities are becoming

more hesitant to reveal to us ~~the~~ not only the rapidity of spread or infection rate, but also they stopped telling us how many of their employees have become ill or died. I definitely suspect that they don't want to scare us with frightenly large numbers. Especially if the rate is doubling every few days or by the week. There's talk. Private conversations. As I pass by walking endless pointless circles around the yard, within earshot I can hear opinions about the pandemic and how it's going to effect us.

From bad to worse. In my very first installment, I specifically describe the impossibility of "social distancing" when it comes to prison. This isn't a secret to anyone. When asked by the press about their plans to deal with this problem in their prison systems, governors start stammering about "taking a look into it" and this and that... "non-violent offender" this, "no sex offender release" that. In New York, Gov. Cuomo's doing 90-day releases. While here in Michigan, with the latest stats being 34,000 plus infected and over 2,700 deaths (as of Th. 4/23/20), Gov. Whitmer and the MDOC are not early releasing anyone. They are simply

releasing prisoners that are **ALREADY PAROLE ELIGIBLE!** This means they have reached their ERDs (earliest release dates). So their actions don't really achieve anything more than emphasize how back-logged the Parole Board is in this state. Now they're scrambling to do something they should have been keeping up on all along. But hey... don't take my word for it—take theirs (see attached).

Thanks "I Pay Representative!"

Here at SRF (Saginaw Corr.), the administration has painted yellow lines every six feet outside of the Chowhall. This is where the overflow line waiting to enter stands. And once we get inside the building proper, there are now pieces of tape X-shaped marking where to stand every SIX feet. Obviously the front office is reacting to the fact that distance is not being maintained. You see—this is exactly what I was referring to earlier in this letter. Once again this is a classic illustration of how prisons must be run, like totalitarian enclaves for the mentally challenged. Institutionalized inmates notoriously obtuse as well as oppositional.

The number of cases keeps going up and up in Michigan. Whether inside or out. Honestly, I don't think that Gov. Whitmer truly has a handle on ROI. A few days ago total cases across the State was 32,000, then 34,000, and as of (4/23) Thursday, it is now 35,291. So when the Governor states that "we have flattened the curve..." well, that's not what the numbers are saying. Total deaths stand at 3,000. For now.

* There is a new JPay message on the kiosk. (Fri. 4/24) Apparently there has been an explosion of cases or outbreak at LCF (Lakeland Corr. Facility/Coldwater) and a smaller spread at Cotton in Jackson.

I fully understand how this could happen for a couple of reasons. First, because I have been to both prisons and am familiar with each. Having spent nearly four years at Coldwater (2007-11), and being assigned housing in a pole barn and a regular building while there; three old structures that used to be an old State "hospital" back in the 50s and 1960s-70s. ~~SEA~~ Repurposed and still being used today as a prison.

Exposition. A pole barn or "dorm"-type setting is simply a corrugated tin structure sitting on a slab of concrete. The building is arranged by dividing it down the center lengthwise with a wall. Each half is then sectioned into cubicles roughly twenty-feet-long by twelve-feet-wide. There are ten cubicles, five on the window side and across a dividing hallway, five on the inner-side abutting the main divider.

When the MDOC first brought this type of housing into the system 30 or so years ago, they deemed them "temporary" structures and this is why such facility designators as KTF (Kinross Temporary Facility) or STF (Stumlish) or ITF (Ionia) still hold true today — three decades later!

Originally designed and intended, pole-barn housing placed four persons (men really) in each cube. But as ~~each~~ tougher and longer sentences were enacted and doled out, bed space and the need for cheaper housing became a concern. Michigan fully intending to expand the prison industrial complex that it created was looking to double, even triple its capacity. So cubes went from four to six and then to eight men double-bunking in a space originally intended for half that.

There is an organization named the American Correctional Association (ACA) in which member States can have their correctional departments become certified as humane for their treatment of prisoners, as long as they meet certain baseline criteria, that is.

Well... when the MDOC continued on its course to keep cramming more and more bodies into these cubes—the ACA complained and threatened to sanction them. So the MDOC said: We don't care about your stupid accreditation anyway—we're out. And so about a dozen years ago, they were.

Coldwater or Lakeland has four pole-barn dorms and three permanent structures. They are all open floor plan, so an airborne virus could easily spread, infecting everyone there within a matter of weeks. This is happening now.

Second, I personally know of a prisoner that was transferred there a few months ago. He has been in contact and has informed us of what is going on there. His name is Mike Emory and what he says is nothing less than horrific.

But I am out of space. Sorry! Jack
(4/24/20)