

Special Report:

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5 things jails, prisons can do to get ahead of COVID-19

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# 5 things jails, prisons can do to get ahead of COVID-19

**As social distancing is near impossible in correctional facilities, here are five steps to preventing COVID-19 in your jail or prison**

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By Sarah Calams

The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was announced on January 21, 2020, in the state of Washington. Since then, nearly 6,000 Americans have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and recent numbers reflect that at least 106 people have died from the novel coronavirus.

Frontline responders to COVID-19, such as doctors, firefighters, EMS providers, law enforcement officers and correctional officers, are scrambling to take care of patients and offenders – only to find out later that they have also been exposed, and require immediate quarantine and medical attention.



If you do need to transport an offender, many officials recommend placing a mask over the mouth of anyone coughing who has been arrested while in transit to jail. (Photo/Guardian RFID)

As with any infectious disease, guidelines for transmission prevention include washing your hands for at least 20 seconds, refraining from shaking hands and touching your face, and sneezing or coughing into your elbow.

While your facility continues to prepare for and prevent potential cases of COVID-19, follow these five recommendations to reduce the risk for staff and inmates.

## **1. KEEP A SOCIAL DISTANCE**

On Monday, March 16, President Donald Trump recommended that Americans do not gather in groups of more than 10 people to combat a recent surge of COVID-19 cases.

This type of social distancing, which is the act of increasing physical space between you, your friends, family members or colleagues, is easier said than done in corrections.

However, some jails have already started implementing and enforcing this COVID-19 safety measure. In Canton, Ohio, Stark County Jail is limiting in-person contact by conducting court hearings via jailhouse video. Friends and family are also not allowed to make in-person visits. Instead, they can "visit" prisoners via an online service.

Additionally, Stark County Sheriff George Maier is asking police officers who stop someone who's not a risk of harm – meaning a lower-level or non-violent offense – to issue a summons rather than transporting them to jail.

If you do need to transport an offender, many officials recommend placing a mask over the mouth of anyone coughing who has been arrested while in transit to jail.

## **2. SCREEN FOR SYMPTOMS**

COVID-19 symptoms include a runny nose, sore throat, cough and fever. More severe cases can result in breathing difficulties or pneumonia.

Undersheriff Carl Albright, with the Hillsdale County (Mich.) Sheriff's Office, has already started enforcing the necessary precautions to lessen the chances of inmate and staff exposure to COVID-19. Currently, medical staff at the jail screen individuals arrested for COVID-19 symptoms. Based on the result of that screening, the jail can refuse to lodge the offender.

If someone exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 is charged with a more serious offense, they will be placed in medical segregation.

## **3. WEAR PROPER PROTECTIVE GEAR AND WASH YOUR HANDS**

Think gloves, wipes, masks and hand sanitizer.

Sheriffs and correctional staff in rural Alabama have already ramped up their sanitation efforts and begun distributing protective gear and preventive items. Etowah County (Ala.) Sheriff Jonathon Horton worked with the Etowah County Emergency Management Agency to provide staff – both in the field and in the jail – with basic protective item kits.

The kits, which include gloves, masks, hand sanitizer and wipes, were given to each patrol deputy and unit to properly protect themselves against COVID-19.

Before COVID-19, hand sanitizer was classified as contraband because of its alcohol content. However, in Ohio, state prison officials authorized the use of hand sanitizer to keep inmates' hands clean and prevent a possible COVID-19 outbreak. New York has gone as far as having inmates make 100,000 gallons a week of hand sanitizer to ramp up production for the state.

#### **4. QUARANTINE WHEN NECESSARY**

Over the weekend, two cellblocks at California's San Quentin State Prison were under quarantine due to some inmates experiencing "flu-like symptoms." Prison officials said there wasn't an indication they were dealing with COVID-19, but it may take days to find out if they are dealing with an outbreak.

More recently, some Miami-Dade COs were sent home and told to monitor themselves for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 after a new arrestee presented symptoms of the novel coronavirus.

Even if your staff, prisoners or inmates are experiencing subtle or mild symptoms, it's wise to either self-quarantine or quarantine the entire facility. Better safe than sorry, right?

#### **5. KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR JAIL, PRISON POPULATION NUMBERS**

Jails and prisons are close-quartered environments. Social distancing is difficult when multiple inmates can sometimes be placed into a single cell.

In Seattle, which currently has the deadliest COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S., multiple immigration rights groups called on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials to release Washington state jail detainees who are older than 60, pregnant or have underlying health conditions that make them vulnerable to COVID-19.

To help avoid the possibility of an outbreak, some jails and prisons are reducing their population of inmates and prisoners. Over the weekend, 38 inmates from Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Jail were either transferred out of jail and sent to prison or released into the community.

There are many similar hearings scheduled around the U.S. to release more inmates to eliminate a potential spread of COVID-19 in already tightly packed jails and prisons.

#### **BE PREPARED**

Remember: Don't panic. Remain prepared and take a vigilant approach to protecting your staff, family, loved ones, community, and your facility's prisoners and inmates.