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VIOLATING CIVIL LIBERTIES AMID COVID-19 lockdown



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York Dispatch

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A group of York County Prison inmates is raising civil liberties concerns about the county's response to a COVID-19 outbreak, alleging they've been systematically denied access to attorneys and the courts.

Likewise, prisoners and their families raised concerns about the safety protocols in place. Whole housing units have been placed on lockdown, they said, even as many corrections officers routinely fail to wear masks.

Notably, Warden Adam Ogle last year cited a recommendation from PrimeCare for not enforcing a vaccine mandate, an assertion that the health contractor itself denied last August.

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"YCP is denying several inmates including myself attorney visits due to our housing unit being placed on presumptive status for 22 straight days," inmate Raymond Rice wrote in a Jan. 19 letter signed by 20 others that was provided to The York Dispatch by a relative.

According to Rice, the unit had no known positive tests but was being preemptively quarantined due to the prison's lack of COVID-19 tests. Likewise, he said the facility was putting off classes that would help inmates qualify for parole.

"They say just put gloves and a mask on, it'll be fine, yet we're being denied attorney visits," he wrote.

UPDATE: COVID cases are dropping at York County Prison — but are they really?

Ogle and all three York County Commissioners did not respond to a list of questions sent to them Wednesday. Ogle initially asked for clarification Wednesday but had not responded by Friday. Further messages were not returned.

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"We have seen numerous counties delay and deny legal visits and court appearances due to COVID-19 concerns," Noah Barth, of Pennsylvania Prison Society, said Thursday. "While the health and safety of people in custody is of paramount concern, it does not need to come at the expense of due process and legal rights."

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Others spoke out about how they're being treated in the prison.

"The jail keeps going on lock down and canceling visits due to COVID," said Ashley Lee Keezel, whose fiancée, Brandon Bortner, is in York County Prison for leaving the work release program. "We were to get married by Zoom last week, had it scheduled, and for some reason the warden canceled it on us. Communication with the jail is horrible."

It's not the only time that inmates have spoken out about COVID-19 in the prison.

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Alexander Santiago, who spent four days in the prison in November, said compliance for masks among both inmates and correctional officers is poor — even as Ogle publicly announced a masking policy for prison staff.

"I was negative, and they put me in a 'pod' where there were positive people. No one wears masks in the pod, and neither do the (corrections officers)," Santiago told The York Dispatch in December. "Some do wear their masks properly, but a majority don't."

Santiago also said he had overheard correctional officers saying that some of them feel sick but refuse to get tested.

York County Prison has been under a modified lockdown since an outbreak in November.

Inmates who test positive stay in a quarantined unit for 14 days from the onset of their symptoms. Their travel is limited to what is considered essential, such as medical visits that must be conducted outside of the prison, court-related matters that cannot be resolved at the prison and releases.

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Meanwhile, Ogle repeatedly refused to identify how many staff members tested positive for COVID-19.

"Staffing levels at any given time are tied to security, which we do not disclose to the public," Ogle said last year.

Other Pennsylvania counties have no such compunction, however.

Allegheny, Cambria, Centre, Chester and Pike counties all provide COVID-19 numbers for both employees and inmates on their websites.

In addition to those five counties, other counties have informed the Pennsylvania Prison Society of how many cases they have among their staff. As of Wednesday, Cumberland reported two cases among its staff, Dauphin three cases, Montour seven cases, Northampton five cases and Washington two cases.

More: Nearly 9% of York County Prison inmates had COVID this week

In addition, the state Department of Corrections also provides data on COVID-19 cases among its inmates and staff. The state had 832 active cases among staff as of Thursday, according to its website.

"It affects the staff levels because they're constantly under the gun of a rotating cast of characters, staff wise, getting sick. And that means more overtime for the people that are working there, and that causes lockdowns to occur," said John Hargreaves, the Prison Society's volunteer director.

At county prisons across Pennsylvania, the reason for lockdowns isn't COVID-19 among the prisoner population but the disease affecting staff ratios, according to Hargreaves.

The Department of Corrections, for example, recently elected to halt all in-person visits in state prisons through February.

"Staffing levels have been significantly impacted throughout the winter months by the same uptick in COVID-19 cases that our communities are experiencing," DOC Acting Secretary George Little said in a release. "Even when symptoms are mild, quarantine requirements for

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When asked if York County Prison would halt in-person visits, Ogle said that wasn't under consideration since the prison conducts visitation exclusively through glass with a wall phone.

"Our situation can change at any moment, but complete suspension of regular visits is not under immediate consideration," he said, via email.

York County Prison does not mandate the vaccine for its staff. However, to conduct work release, inmates must be vaccinated.

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