
DOC MURDERS INMATE

by Shawn Fisher, Old Colony (January 2021)

Back in April of 2020 when COVID-19 was spreading through the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Department of Corrections (DOC) took extraordinary measures to prevent the virus from entering and spreading through the prison system. Those measures amounted to a state-wide lock-down of every prison and temperature checks of every employee prior to their entering a facility. It was no different here at Old Colony Correctional Center (OCCC). As an isolated population, the only way a prisoner could contract COVID-19 was if an employee brought it into the prison.

For weeks OCCC remained on a modified lock-down status, which meant guards and staff prepared and served meals, cleaned the prison, distributed medications and handed out canteen order forms. The only time prisoners were allowed to leave their cells was for tier time. Ten prisoners at a time were allowed 30 minutes to take a shower and make a phone call.

This modified lock-down continued for weeks and was the DOC's master plan for stopping the spread of COVID. In spite of calls from legislators and advocates to reduce the prison population and release those who are at risk and pose no threat to public safety, the DOC moved full speed ahead with their "lock-down plan." Ultimately, the plan failed. Other institutions like MCI Framingham, Massachusetts Treatment Center, MCI Norfolk, MCI Shirley, Souza Baranowski and others began turning out one positive case after another. OCCC was one of the only prisons that went months without any positive test results. Life went on. Over the weeks and months to follow there were no positive cases of COVID-19.

Prisoners were gradually allowed more and more time out of their cells. Eventually they were allowed three hours of tier time, recreation in the prison yard and able to return to work assignments in the kitchen and janitorial posts. The new "norm" became the routine. In spite of my criticisms at how OCCC was handling the situation, I have to admit, I was impressed at how long this prison remained virus free. That changed on December 15, 2020. That's the day I became one of 19 inmates at OCCC to first test positive for COVID.

At first, I wasn't upset. I knew it was inevitable that the virus would enter the facility. **It was the decisions made by this administration following the positive test results that infuriated myself and others.** This administration had eight months to prepare for a possible COVID 19 outbreak. The failures at other prisons to stop the spread of the virus should have served as an example of what NOT to do. Instead, it seems this administration never invested any thought or research into the matter.

Once we tested positive, they removed us from general population and placed us in a segregation unit with just a mattress and blanket. Twenty-four hours later they moved us back to general population. They housed us in a unit on a tier that was emptied out for the purpose of...quarantining. The unit housed one tier of infected quarantined inmates and three tiers of

inmates who were not infected (I'm still scratching my head at the wisdom of that decision). From the moment we tested positive the administration allowed the rest of general population to maintain the "norm." Inmates went to work, had three hours tier time and were allowed access to the yard. All the while, no one thought to think about contact tracing. One of the inmates who tested positive worked in the kitchen! Some worked in the Print Shop! I was a peer mentor and visited inmates in another unit! Inmates continued to move about spreading the virus throughout the prison.

On the quarantine tier we were allowed 30 minutes tier time. We touched the shower, phone, canteen kiosk and anything else we came in contact with. We just weren't allowed to go down to the other three tiers. The problem is, those three tiers of inmates came out for tier time and touched everything we touched. Those three tiers were eventually emptied out and the unit used for quarantine. Yet, all those men who were moved, were moved to other units. In effect, they moved inmates who were exposed to COVID 19 to other units, contaminating and exposing other prisoners to the virus.

Within a week the whole prison was sick. It's now been three weeks and people continue to get sick. I have since been cleared and moved out of the COVID 19 unit and as I write this article someone on my tier has been coughing up a lung for two days. Sadly, yesterday COVID 19 claimed its first fatality at OCCC in John Shine. A man who originally tested negative. But due to all these "moves" became infected and became this prison administration's first murder victim.

In hindsight, this administration's incompetence and failure to properly contain the virus comes as no surprise. Back in April of 2020 the superintendent posted a memo advising inmates to who live together to "sleep at opposite ends of the bunk in order to practice social distancing." With the murder of John Shine, this administration is just as culpable as those who were held responsible for the COVID-19 deaths that occurred at the Soldier's Home nursing facility.

My fear is that because prisoners are considered a throwaway population, no one will call out for justice. Don't let the murder of John Shine be swept under the rug. He is the 18th death in the DOC since the start of this pandemic. Please call your representative and the Governor's office demanding justice. The pandemic has taken too many lives as it is, it doesn't need the assistance or incompetence to help further its agenda.

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