

Lifers' Group Inc. Fast Facts: "FOR WANT OF A RELIABLE MASK":
 How the Massachusetts DOC Endangered Prisoner Lives and Health
 To Avoid Paying for Effective Masks During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The effectiveness of masks to limit spread of coronavirus has been amply validated by experts and experience. In April, Covid-19 infection began to appear inside state prisons. The Department of Correction (DOC) locked down prisoners 24/7, an invariable reflex response, which had a serious detrimental effect during the pandemic. Rather than protecting already crowded prisoners, this policy forced them 24/7 into intimate contact, sharing bathrooms, communal space, and closed-circuit ventilation systems. Not surprisingly, nodes of infection soon emerged, involving dozens of cases. By late April, the DOC provided professionally made, multilayer surgical-style masks to all prisoners every two weeks. Prisoners were required to wear these masks in congregate settings. The Table shows that, as compliance improved, infections subsided over several weeks. Within a month, there were virtually no new cases, a situation that persisted through October.

On October 14, 2020, the DOC distributed home-made, washable masks crafted by prisoner labor at MCI-Norfolk Industries. The DOC mandated that henceforth only these masks were approved and must be worn. These masks adhered to no known standard template and were rapidly reviled as ineffective. They were too big, fitting loosely, and were made with only a single layer of cloth, which expert experience has shown is inadequate. Too large, and without a wire to fit around the nose, the oversize masks leaked air around all margins and often slipped off the nose. When prisoners filed grievances, the DOC blithely responded: "...be advised the issuance of a cloth mask for an inmate in general population is appropriate".

The consequences of the DOC's truly penny-wise, pound-foolish plan is readily revealed by the Table. Within two weeks case numbers started to climb and, by the third week, the weekly infection rates soared in multiple prisons. This pattern has persisted throughout the winter. As prisoners have been confined to housing units throughout the year, this increase cannot be the result of more winter-time indoor exposure. Rather, it correlates with the DOC's continued mandate requiring the use of the poorly conceived,

(Over)

TABLE

2020 Dates	Confirmed cases	
	New	Total
4/5-4/12	84	84
4/13-4/19	33	117
4/20-4/26	66	183
4/27-5/3	83	266
5/4-5/10	101	367
5/11-5/17	13	380
5/18-5/25	16	396
5/25-5/31	11	407
6/1-6/7	2	409
6/8-6/14	2	411
6/15-6/21	2	413
6/22-6/28	3	416
6/29-7/8	1	417
7/9-7/15	0	417
7/16-7/22	0	417
7/23-7/29	1	418
7/30-8/5	0	418
8/6-8/12	0	418
8/13-8/19	1	419
8/20-8/26	0	419
8/27-9/2	1	420
9/3-9/9	0	420
9/10-9/16	0	420
9/17-9/23	1	421
9/24-9/30	28*	449
10/1-10/7	11	460
10/8-10/14	8	468
10/15-10/21	4	472
10/22-10/28	4	476
10/29-11/4	81	557
11/5-11/11	183	740
11/12-11/18	106	846
11/19-11/24	173	1019
11/25-12/2	236	1255
12/3-12/9	259	1514
12/10-12/16	128	1642
12/17-12/23	198	1832
12/24-12/30	253	2085

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 Dotted lines mark start/
 end of surgical mask use
 *localized outbreak at
 MASAC (Alcohol & Substance
 Abuse Center)

inadequately crafted and defective masks.

In short, unwilling to expend trivial sums (50¢ to \$1) per professionally made mask, the DOC has made its captive prisoner population vulnerable to the ravages of coronavirus. Thousands of prisoners have become infected in these crowded, shared quarters, inadequately protected by the cheap, home-made DOC masks. Many prisoners, especially the elderly and vulnerable, have suffered untold physical harm, some even losing their lives. All prisoners have been adversely affected by the enforced lockdown and lack of all educational, rehabilitative and self-help programs because of the persistently large numbers of infections. The short-sighted mandated use of defective masks has added immeasurably to the devastation already wrought upon the prison population. Taken together with the DOC's negligent omission to plan, prepare and execute a rational plan for Covid-19 mitigation in state prisons, these failings and their consequences for helplessly captive prisoners borders on the inexcusable.

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January 2021

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