

The Nine Hour Two Week Lock Down
A Coronavirus Update
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Tonight at midnight will mark one week since DOC Commissioner Carol Mici ordered a full lock down of all prisons in Masachusetts. Lock downs are uncommon in the Commonwealth's prisons, even more so in medium security prisons. Over the past twenty years, where I am housed at MCI-Norfolk, there have been only two lock downs that have lasted longer than a day. So it is fair to say that the current lock down is unprecedented.

A typical lock down is triggered by a security event inside the prison. During a lock down, prisoners are confined to their cells. If they are allowed out, it is only for limited purposes, such as to shower or to use the telephone. When the Coronavirus began infecting prisoners and staff members at various prisons, the only thing the DOC could think to use to prevent the spread of the virus was a security lock down.

The DOC, however, quickly learned a lesson that many on the outside have learned over the past month. The essential employees in a crisis like this are sometimes the people we think about the least.

On the outside, essential employees include hospital janitors, grocery store employees, and people like my mother. She works as a baker in a middle school cafeteria. Even though she is 79-years-old, she has gone into work every day since her school closed to help prepare and distribute hundreds of meals each day for kids who might otherwise go hungry.

In here, essential employees include scores of prisoners. That point was made clear only nine hours into the two week lock down when I caught my first glimpse of an essential worker wearing a gray uniform with DOC printed across the back. The uniform of a prisoner. The next day, I noticed two more prisoners helping to sanitize the facility. The following day, I watched a number of prisoners return to their jobs in prison industries where they are producing hand sanitizer, soap, cleaning chemicals, and face masks for use throughout Massachusetts. As the week progressed, more and more essential employees were called to report to work. Laundry workers cleaned clothes and linens while supply workers unloaded trucks and delivered cleaning chemicals to each unit.

The essential employees inside prison are also like many of the essential employees on the outside. They are underpaid, with many earning less than \$10.00 per week. They have little job security, especially given that they can be removed from their work assignment for any reason or no reason at all. And, they have no access to protective equipment. While DOC staff have been issued masks and gloves, no such protection has been offered to the essential employees that have kept this prison running during the lock down.

In her memo to all of us housed by the DOC, Commissioner Carol Mici said, "the health of our staff and inmate population continues to be of paramount importance." In her note, the Commissioner's words put the staff and prison population on equal footing. But that simply is not the case. It wasn't before the Coronavirus and it is not now.

We are essential, but we are not equal.

My job is not considered to be essential during this lock down (at least not yet). So, I wanted to take a moment to salute my friends and neighbors inside the walls who are risking their health and safety each day to make sure my laundry is clean and my unit is disinfected. I also thank those who I see going to industries each day who are helping people far beyond the walls that imprison us and who will never publicly be credited for their contribution.

The Coronavirus crisis will one day pass. When it does, we must not forget all those people in society who are essential, whether they live in the free world or inside a prison. And, we must do all we can to make them equal.