

Message from inside from Brian Knippers

Death Stalks the Massachusetts Department of Corrections

by Brian D. Knippers Comm. #W95692

I'm writing this knowing I'm going to die. I have already said my goodbyes to family and friends. I've made the phone calls, written the letters and shared tears with my loved ones. I'm prepared to die and I accept it, but there's another way.

I write to you from NCCI-Gardner. I am an incarcerated person placed in the custody and care of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. I reside on the second floor of a dormitory unit on the west side of the prison known as housing unit 'H'. As far as we're aware, we the prison population of NCCI-Gardner, there are no known cases of Covid-19 in the prison at this time. However, based on empirical analysis, raw data and a little commonsense, those of us who've analyzed the expected explosive growth of the Corona Virus anticipate the virus being brought into the prison — by a correctional officer or essential staff member — in the next 14 days.

If necessary precautions were being taken to prevent the outbreak and spread of the Corona Virus here at NCCI-Gardner I'd feel more optimistic about my chances of survival. But, beyond several basic safety measures instituted by Carol Mici, the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, there's been little action taken to prevent the inevitable outbreak and spread of Covid-19.

Per a directive by Commissioner Mici we are currently in the midst of a 14 day lock-down. We only leave our unit to receive medication. However, in doing so, hundreds of prisoners congregate in the vestibule of the "New Gym" at various times awaiting to receive their medication. We're escorted to the gym in small groups, six to eight prisoners at a time, but inevitably prisoners touch the doors and metal paneling in the waiting area. We cluster together to await our turn to receive medication. The door's closed and the air in the front of the gym doesn't recirculate well. In other words, we are exposed. And, due to the overwhelming number of incarcerated people who take medication at NCCI Gardner — we have an aging prison population — there's no end to the number of incarcerated people who are shuttled back and forth to this building. This coordinated effort to keep us safe might be more effective if the staff cleaned the area in between groups, but that's not being accomplished. The MDOC may be telling the public that the safety of incarcerated people is their number one concern, but it's not, it's clearly not.

This, in concert with being in a building with 80 men who share six sinks, five phones and one shower, make the likelihood of the virus spreading through our ranks at an incredible pace disconcertingly realistic. The Department of Public Health requires 60 square feet of floor space per incarcerated individual. In our unit, by my best estimation, six men share sixty feet of floor space. We're stuck on a small cruise ship with no walls, or cabins. I know I sound as though I'm foretelling a doomsday scenario, but that's what it is.

There are two additional preventative measures in place that amount to almost nothing. I say almost because one of those measures is to provide us with hand sanitizer. I know washing your hands is the best way of breaking down the coronavirus, but it's nice to have hand sanitizer at your disposal as a portable alternative. Although, I must note that the M-DOC's website claimed that we had access to hand sanitizer four or five days prior to the first hand pump appeared on our unit.

The second measure, or additional measure being taken, is the mandate that correctional officers wear masks. Unfortunately, some of the officers find the masks uncomfortable and they remove them, or leave them hanging around their necks, at their leisure. This may seem trivial, but our only risk of exposure comes from the prison

staff bringing the virus into the prison. Please take a moment to contemplate that statement. Our exposure is entirely dependent upon those we have the most antagonistic relationship with.

I'm not saying a correctional officer, or essential staff member, would intentionally bring Covid 19 into the prison, but at the same time I don't believe many of these men and women would lose sleep if the prison population here at NCCI Gardner became infected. Well, beyond the fact that it would inhibit their own safety. I'm sure the masks would stay firmly in place if that was the case.

We must appeal to the powers that be and ask that all incarcerated persons be released immediately. There's no death sentence in Massachusetts, why should I be held to a standard that doesn't exist. Massachusetts is supposed to be a progressive state, but right now all I see is red tape and political posturing. No one is pushing for immediate action. Ultra-conservative states are moving at a faster pace than Massachusetts. Does this make any sense? Those like myself who are immunocompromised are at a much higher risk of dying from Covid-19. Also, incarcerated persons who are 55+ are at a much higher risk of perishing from the Corona Virus. Why is Massachusetts caught in a state of inaction?

Keeping the prison population locked down and waiting for the inevitable to take place is no way to combat this virus. There's no such thing as social distancing in prison! There's no protocol that will protect us unless we're released. I sleep in a bunk with another incarcerated person. Four feet to my right there's another bunk with two more incarcerated persons. Two feet to my left there's another bunk with a couple more incarcerated people. We're in this together. If anyone in our dorm becomes infected, we all share this infestation. There's no protocol, or security measures the MDOC can take to eliminate this immediate threat.

It's a joke to think you can control Covid 19 when social distancing is impossible. It's a no win situation unless the decision makers in the Massachusetts State Government start making some decisions and releasing incarcerated people.

Like many incarcerated people I'm immunocompromised. As I mentioned in the beginning of this essay I may as well be dead if I catch Covid 19. And, I'm not alone. Whether you're immunocompromised, 55+ years-old, obese, a former smoker, or an unhealthy person for any number of reasons your chances of survival become dramatically reduced. I didn't plea out to die in prison. I know it's a possibility, I'm only human, but I wasn't sentenced to death.

The crime I committed doesn't justify a death sentence. None of our crimes justify a death sentence. I'm just one of a number of men and women who've served a lengthy prison sentence. When we're released the vast majority of us will simply go about our lives. We will adhere to the governor's restriction that you stay home. We are incarcerated people. We feel, we see, we touch, we have loved ones, we matter.

With your help, your compassion, and your love, may we be released into the arms of those who love us and spared death, alone, imprisoned.

June 2020