

COVID-19 IN MASS. PRISONS: FIVE STORIES FROM BEHIND THE WALL

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The Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc in the Massachusetts DOC, and MCI-Norfolk--as predicted--has been especially hard hit. By year's end, the confirmed PCR-positivity rate was approaching 40% of prisoners, almost ten times the community rate. And, because of excessively long intervals between testing, many infected prisoners escaped detection, their viral titers clearing before they were tested. The reports below demonstrate the virtual impossibility of prisoners avoiding infection once the virus penetrated the prison. The DOC's lack of preparation and refusal to reduce crowding, as well as misguided quarantine policies led to conditions that virtually mandated cross-infection. The windfall reduction in new prisoner admissions because of court closures was squandered, and crowding not reduced. Additionally, the DOC has made every effort to hide the severity of infections in prison, even resorting to "releasing" some dying hospitalized prisoners mere hours before their death in order to claim that they did not die in custody. As usual, the DOC has made every effort to block the view through prison walls--but here are five stories from inside. Varying in age and severity of underlying conditions and outcomes, these survivors share their often difficult experiences with you.

J: 29 years old, no underlying conditions

My Covid-19 experience at MCI-Norfolk was daunting and traumatic. During the spring surge in April we had only a few cases here. This let me feel that the administration was taking the virus seriously and that they were concerned about our health. On the other hand, during the second surge starting in late October, the majority of prisoners at Norfolk quickly became infected with Covid-19. Many around me developed symptoms but were not tested. The aftermath of this second surge was utterly different. All prisoners, with and without symptoms, were locked together on our tiers and due to improper planning and rules, infection spread like wild-fire through Norfolk.

When I contracted Covid-19, I felt like a victim of the virus. Truly my health deteriorated. For instance, I felt weak, had a headache, lost my sense of smell and taste. I advised the unit correctional officer that I was feeling ill in hopes that I would receive compassionate medical care. However, I was removed from the general populatiion and isolated in a filthy cell in the segregation unit which was extremely hot and had very poor air circulation. It was difficult to breathe or sleep. These harsh conditions exacerbated my Covid-19 symptoms. I became very concerned because I received no treatment other than temperature checks and the nurses refused to answer my questions about what I was feeling and what was happening to me. I felt hopeless, depressed, confused, powerless, scared and alone. Most importantly, I was disappointed because the DOC seemed to penalize me for contracting Covid-19. They simply isolated me to do time in the "hole". I hope this awful situation does not recur but if it does, I hope the DOC has learned from their negligence.

R: 56 years old with Hypothyroidism,
Obesity and Pre-diabetes(on metformin)

This year's Covid-19 pandemic in Norfolk has been hard on all of us. Mixed in with many other prisoners from all blocks, I worked in the Mass-Corr industry clothing department, making masks, gowns and other PPE items needed by the state. I was healthy while working until they locked down the whole prison when infection made it into the camp in late October.

Once we were all squeezed together in our cells and tiers, infection spread fast. At first my unit did not test positive but soon men around me became sick. I became sick November 14 and stayed very sick 'til December 3. While I had all the symptoms of Covid-19, headaches, body-aches, chills and no sense of taste or smell, my main problem was vomiting and diarrhea. That was so severe and intense that I had to crawl the few feet to my toilet and even ended up soiling myself. I was so weak and sick I could barely move. I was scared to death, and stayed in my cell, taking Tylenol and allergy pills to help me sleep. Officers knew I was sick, and one even saw me vomiting. I barely managed to make it down for temperature and oxygen checks, and everyone who saw me told me how bad I looked. I lost over 20 pounds. I was really afraid, but I knew medical would not help me and I would be isolated in the hole with no real treatment. I was scared, worried and depressed, not sure I would get through it. I had never experienced anything like this before.

Amazingly, when I was tested on December 7th, I was told that it was not detected in me which I find very weird. I am better now. However, with the news of a new mutated Covid coming, this scares me very much. The last one got me really sick and I fear this one will more than likely kill me. Over-crowding, poor health care and lack of knowledge of these pandemics will hurt and even kill many in here if the DOC and state leaders don't take better care of the prison population. My health issues make me vulnerable as is true for many others in prison. So, I ask, what becomes of all prisoners like me, because it seems these administration people don't have any clue what to do. Unless they think this is one way to eliminate over-crowding in prisons?

For myself, I hope to make it long enough to get a parole and live long enough to see my family again. I have only a little hope left. I have no faith in those who run the Department of Correction and know many other prisoners feel the same way. We all just hope the new Covid never makes it here. We all pray.

L: 69 years old with Steroid-dependent COPD/Asthma, Hypertension,
Type 2 Insulin-dependent Diabetes, Lung Cancer with lobe removal
and Metastatic Prostate Cancer after double-dose radiation therapy

DG: Tell me your feelings about being a prisoner during the Covid-19 pandemic.

L: All year, I was very worried and stressed. I knew I had many serious underlying conditions and knew, from watching TV and Dr. Fauci, that I was extremely high risk if I got sick. Getting information from the DOC was impossible. Because of my concern, I applied for medical parole but was turned down the first time on July 6, before infection got into Norfolk. Then, after reapplying, I was turned down again after getting sick.

DG: Why were you so anxious?

L: Because we spent so much time locked in on our tiers. I needed to share a common bathroom and showers with many others, so really could not isolate. I knew that if Covid got in here, there was no way I could avoid it. Besides, they called us to work in industries every day where men from all units congregated before returning to our units at night. The only PPE we had was masks.

DG: Tell me about your illness.

L: It started on November 24, a Tuesday. I was tired, then felt weak and broke out in sweats. At first I thought it was my diabetes. I was passing the temperature checks and oxygen saturation tests that the staff was doing. Then I just kept getting worse and worse. By Sunday, the 29th, I was so bad I just ran out of energy. I couldn't get down the stairs anymore and then could not get out of bed. The tier door was locked but I got another prisoner to kick the door until the officer came. I needed to be taken out right away. They helped me down the stairs and then medical put me in a wheelchair and took me to Outpatient. They transferred me to the hospital but I don't remember that at all.

DG: What were you told? Did they take the time to chain you?

L: I can't remember. I don't remember anything until Tuesday when I woke up at Milford Hospital, on the first floor, in the emergency department. I was on oxygen and other treatments.

DG: Then what happened?

L: Sometime around Tuesday, they told me I was positive for Covid-19 and that they were very worried about me because of all my underlying conditions. They told me I might not make it and asked for the phone number for my family. But, I was so sick I could not remember that. So they called Norfolk but the DOC said that for CORI and security reasons they could not give out my family's phone. So, my family was never informed.

DG: How were you feeling?

L: Terrible. Helpless, hopeless, powerless. Very alone and frightened. Then the doctors and nurses told me I was getting worse and needed to be moved upstairs to a hospital floor. Up there they gave me more treatments and told me I needed plasma treatment. They told me the only plasma that matched me was from a white person and asked if that was okay. I said, sure. By Wednesday, I was intubated but I really don't remember much of that. I was sedated and was like totally drunk. When I woke up about three days later, my hands were tied to the bedrails and I wanted the tube out. I was physically miserable and very stressed out. I really thought I was done for, but in some ways, I really didn't care anymore.

DG: Then what?

L: Then some Mental Health person came in and asked me a bunch of questions. Was I suicidal? I let them know, No, but I was sick of being sedated and sleeping. So, she told me that these were good signs and that she would recommend they take the tube out. On Friday, they took the tube out and tried to get me to eat. But, I had no taste or smell and I just couldn't seem to eat. I didn't eat a single meal at that hospital. They monitored my breathing and oxygen levels and then took me off oxygen. Then on December 7th, Monday, they told me I was ready to go back to Norfolk.

DG: How did that go?

L: Well, they shackled me up and took me to the hole at Norfolk. The cell was filthy. No one cleaned those cells between prisoners and it was hot, too hot to breathe. But, a nurse came and made them open the window. That was a terrible time because I had no information and no answers. I asked the nurses but they only did temp checks and would not tell me anything. Finally, after three days in the hole, mental health came and after talking with me, again asking about whether I was suicidal, told me she would expedite my release from the hole.

DG: Then what happened?

L: They sent me to the Assisted Daily Living dormitory. There were about a dozen other guys up there, mostly the regular residents. I was quarantined up there for 7 more days, until December 17. I think it was mostly to protect me from the camp rather than protecting the camp from me. Because by then, infection had been and was all over Norfolk.

DG: What was the worst part of this ordeal for you?

L: The mental anxiety, not knowing and not being able to get any answers from the DOC staff or DOC medical people. It was really scary. I thought I might die because of my underlying problems and was not getting any answers or treatment. I remember early on calling my sister and telling her, "I got Covid, and I'm dying in here". And, it got so bad, that at one point I said, "I don't care no more".

DG: Anything else?

L: Yeah, then on December 22, the DOC Commissioner denied my medical parole for the second time. It seems now that I had survived the Covid, there was no longer any reason to release me.

W: 75 years old with Type 2 Diabetes, Hypertension, Chronic
Kidney Disease, and history of G/I Bleeding

DG: What were your feelings about being a prisoner during the Covid pandemic?

W: I was worried about it--stressed out. I kept having chest pressure and wondering if it was Covid. I was worried but also anxious about reporting it because I didn't want to get taken out of the unit. Then, when we were tested, and I was negative, I felt better. But when the units on either side of us were positive, I knew it wasn't right.

DG: What happened then?

W: Well, the guy across the hall got sick and my cellmate was with him all the time. And, then my cellmate got symptoms too, so I knew I was next.

DG: Tell me about you getting sick.

W: I got sick on Sunday, November 22, just before Thanksgiving. I was fine on the Friday before, going out to the yard and walking. But on Sunday, I didn't feel good and I got short of breath. The tiers were locked but they called us down for temperature checks and my oxygen saturation was about 86%. The nurses wrote it down and then a little later I was told to pack up. I was moving to the RB (segregation unit). There I was put into a single cell. It was too hot, and I couldn't breathe, but I knew the CO and he was able to open a window. It

was still too hot, and I had trouble breathing. I would sleep and keep waking up. The next day, Monday, they checked me and brought up some oxygen and then pretty soon put me in a wheelchair.

DG: And then what happened?

W: They shackled me up and sent me to Milford Hospital. At first I was in a holding area, but pretty soon they took me upstairs. They started to treat me with IVs and oxygen at 2 liters. Then, later, I got plasma treatment. Also shots in my belly, to keep my veins from clotting. Later they gave me something that made my blood sugars spike and they had to put me on insulin to control that.

DG: What then?

W: Well, about one day in, they told me I had a kidney stone and that it needed to be taken out. It took them two days to set that up because of my Covid, but on Wednesday they took me to the OR and when I woke up, they told me they had put a stent in my tube. They told me that it should come out in three weeks.

DG: Wow. That was a lot of action. What happened then?

W: After 10 days they said I was ready to go back to Norfolk, so they sent me back. But when I got there, my oxygen saturations were still low and so Norfolk sent me to Brockton Hospital. There, they checked me and after two hours sent me back to Norfolk.

DG: Where did you go?

W: They put me into the 8-2 unit for four days and then I got back to my own cell on Sunday, exactly two weeks after I left.

DG: How are you doing now?

W: Well, not too bad, except that things are pretty messed up with my follow-up and treatment. They keep changing my blood pressure medication and I've had headaches and bouts of high blood pressure which they treat with emergency clonidine. Plus, I had badly swollen legs and they didn't know why, but they gave me 7 days of Lasix, and that's better. But, now it's six weeks since the stent was put in and they haven't checked with the doctor about that. It was supposed to come out after three weeks, but I haven't seen the specialist and no one is doing anything about it.

DG: Anything else?

W: I keep putting in sick slips, but things seem pretty confused and I'm not getting any answers. I guess I just need to keep putting in more sick slips.

D: 80 years old with COPD/Asthma, Cardiac Arrhythmias,
Pancytopenia (all blood cell counts low), and history of Stroke

As a prisoner, I was very apprehensive about the consequences of the Covid pandemic in prisons. And, I was soon enveloped by a grim sense of foreboding as it became evident that the DOC was not making any effort to reduce the risk to prisoners. Prisoners were locked down 24/7, crowded into very tight quarters on our tiers, sharing bathrooms, chow halls, and closed circuit ventilation systems. It would be impossible to avoid cross-infection if and when the virus slipped through the walls. And, I knew infection could not be

kept out indefinitely. The DOC was doing nothing to prepare. There was no reduction in crowding, the Norfolk population reduced by only 34 (2%) between April and November. Even more alarming, prisoner workers were congregated by the hundreds at work each day only to disperse to all housing units at night. This serious breach of quarantine would render inevitable the eventual rapid dissemination of infection once it arrived. Although usually optimistic by nature, I could not suppress an inexorable sense of doom about surviving, at age 80, with underlying conditions.

The expected crisis arrived in late October. Large numbers of prisoners began to exhibit symptoms. An initial round of testing showed that 72, and then 234 (19% of Norfolk prisoners), were Covid-19 positive. Housing unit after housing unit had a majority of prisoners testing positive. Inexplicably, my unit tested negative--however, within days prisoners all around me began to have symptoms. With reflex and unthinking, but typical, DOC policy, Norfolk was again locked down 24/7, squeezing us into tight tiers. Shared ventilation, bathrooms and inevitable close contact created a perfect Covid incubator. Within days, every tier had multiple prisoners with symptoms while some became sick enough to be taken out and hospitalized. Despite desperately making use of every available avoidance measure, close contact as well as shared space and ventilation seemed to guarantee that I would be infected.

On November 19, I developed a sore throat and cough. Within days, I had severe headaches, body aches, fatigue, sleep disruptions, cough and lost my sense of smell and taste. Diligently maintaining use of my COPD inhalers, I surprisingly never had any obvious difficulty breathing. I used Tylenol and meloxicam (a long acting NSAID) to control symptoms and, to my delight, soon began to improve. By the end of November I had largely recovered and discontinued supplemental medication. Within days, as we were allowed into the yard, I resumed walking and exercising. Then, on December 4, the oldest prisoner in my unit, aged 85, died of Covid-19 in his cell, a poignant reminder of my good fortune.

All those not previously testing positive were retested the second week of December. On Friday, December 11, three weeks after onset of symptoms and one week after feeling well, I was told I had tested positive. I was directed to move to "isolation". Isolation turned out to be a dormitory with 40 to 60 other newly positive prisoners in the old condemned and mold-infested Probation unit. It was crowded with beds only three feet apart, communal bathroom and a closed circuit ventilation system. I fought the decision, telling the housing officer that this venue was unsafe for me with COPD and allergies. I was told that there was simply no other space. Even the hole was full.

That first day, Friday, seemed to go well. But, by the next morning, I noted some increased fatigue and by the afternoon I experienced a shaking chill (rigor), followed by a burst of sweating. I was at first reassured by my normal twice per day temperature checks and oxygen saturations. But, on Saturday night, I awoke to a soaking sweat and this pattern continued to exacerbate each day that I was in Probation. Every day I became more mentally foggy, more fatigued, needing to nap even with the hubbub around me. I was experiencing rigors and sweats several times during the day. Sunday night I soaked through my T-shirt, underwear and sheets. I also noted more persistent lightheadedness. I complained about being forced into Probation and prepared to file a grievance. We were all precipitously evacuated from Probation on Monday evening (was the unsafe condition at last recognized?). We were

urgently moved to 8-2, a high security unit. There I was in a single cell but that night experienced my most severe and unrelenting rigor and sweat. During three days in 8-2, I was relieved to note a steadily diminishing severity of symptoms. I was eager to return to my original housing unit as it appeared that the longer I was away from Probation, the less frequent and intense my rigors and sweats had become. However, although initially improving, now after 23 days back in my unit, I continue to have nightly sweats and persistent episodes of lightheadedness. I also continue to be fatigued and have experienced muscle aches, weakness and occasional cramping. These symptoms now seem to have leveled off at a persistent, chronic level, with little if any day by day abatement. I cannot help but conclude that my premature exposure to high concentrations of Covid-19 positive prisoners while housed in the crowded Probation unit has substantially exacerbated and complicated the course of my illness.

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P.O. Box 43, Norfolk, MA 02056
January 10, 2021