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November 30, 2020 Update from MCI-Norfolk

Things have substantially deteriorated here at MCI-Norfolk since the last update. Norfolk was locked down on October 27, 2020, after two housing units became infected. Since then, the DOC has admitted that 256 prisoners here (over 20% of the population) have tested positive for Covid-19(1). These results have come from testing performed in early November, when all prisoners and some guards were tested. Almost no further or follow-up testing has been performed since. Those who tested positive in late October or early November were moved into isolation. Prisoners were hustled out of isolation after only days because of acute space shortages. Initially, and until November 15, most were isolated in the two Probation units which had been condemned and slated for demolition because of severe and intractable mold contamination. It appears that the DOC was totally unprepared for the outbreak and resorted to moving positive prisoners into this inexcusable location out of desperation. The Probation units were then ordered closed by the Dept of Public Health because of the unacceptably high risk to prisoners. Additionally, on November 4, desperate for additional isolation beds, the 8-2 unit was evacuated of its 90 prisoners to make space. These prisoners, who had not yet been tested, were dispersed throughout all other housing units in the prison. This egregious action not only demonstrates the DOC's total lack of preparation for this entirely foreseeable outbreak, but also makes clear the DOC's deliberate indifference to spreading infection throughout the prison as has occurred.

Ever since the initial lock down on April 4, 2020, prisoners in each housing unit have been segregated from those in other units as a preventive measure. As documented in prior Updates, the notable exception to this rule was that prisoner workers from all units were congregated by the dozens in Industries and Maintenance areas, in the mainline and staff culinary kitchens, and in janitorial, trash pickup, and other areas where they worked and interacted together. These workers then daily returned to their original housing units each evening to mix with other, non-working prisoners. This persistent cross-contamination was in total disregard of quarantining principles and, as predicted in prior Updates, assured and made inevitable the wholesale dissemination of Covid-19 infection throughout the prison. The only purpose for this deliberate disregard for prisoner safety was the DOC's wish to use prisoner labor to facilitate running the prison and to maintain work output in the prison Industries area. It has been only since the dramatic spread of infection early this month that this policy has been interrupted.

In the meantime, prisoners exhibit symptoms but are kept in their housing units, locked into their cells and onto their tiers with no capacity to isolate or distance while spreading infection to others in the unit. Even when obviously symptomatic, prisoners are not removed to isolation unless they request it, nor are they tested. This allows the DOC to hide the extent of infection in the institution, which certainly now far exceeds the 256 positive tests admitted by the reports to the Special Master. It also assures that levels of infection continue to fester steadily throughout the institution, putting all, especially older and vulnerable prisoners, at risk. That this is occurring is manifest because daily ambulances are moving prisoners too sick to remain in their cells to outside institutions. Presumably, they are then tested and managed outside the prison, and so are not counted as being tested

and infected in prison. It is documented that at least one elderly Norfolk prisoner who died of Covid-19 infection was released on "medical parole" literally hours before his death, thereby avoiding being counted as a prisoner Covid-19 death! His fate is almost certainly not an isolated one. The upshot is that it is likely that a majority of prisoners at Norfolk have been exposed to infection. Neither the true number nor outcomes of Covid-19 infection at Norfolk will likely ever be known due to the secrecy and deliberate disregard for prisoner well-being maintained by the DOC.

The prison continues to maintain an external semblance of concern, sending a team of prisoner workers to spray inside units (once again, mixing personnel from multiple units) but the pro-forma spraying of diluted bleach solution onto door knobs and in common areas can in no way mitigate the crowding into cells and tiers caused by the locking of prisoners into close quarters 24/7. Space remains extremely tight, with cells filled to capacity(2) and the need to share communal spaces, including bathrooms and showers. As before, cleaning supplies are limited and not available to most prisoners. Bleach and cleaning materials are considered contraband. The medical masks originally issued every two weeks have been discontinued, replaced by "made-in-Industries", single-layer, poorly fitting masks that are now the only officially authorized masks to be worn by prisoners. Apparently, issuing disposable masks became too great an expense for the DOC.

The end result is that Covid-19 infection is rampant at MCI-Norfolk and that there is no oversight due to deliberate obfuscation of facts by an administration determined to lock away reality behind prison walls. The costs will be borne by prisoners, some of whom will die and others who will bear long-term consequences of their infections(3).

ENDNOTES

1. www.mass.gov/doc/sjc-12926-special-masters-weekly-report-11182020
2. Ibid. The prisoner population at MCI-Norfolk has been reduced by only 34 since the onset of the pandemic, from 1267 to 1233. Operational capacity at Norfolk was previously reduced by 150 beds by the permanent decommissioning of Probation and South Yard units during 2018-2019.
3. del Rio C, Collins LF, & Malani P. "Long-Term Health Consequences of Covid-19" *J Am Med Assoc(JAMA)*, 324:1723-4 (2020).

[See also prior Updates (dated May 10 & 20; June 1, 13, & 30; July 15 & 29; August 17; Sept 12; Oct 13 & 31) providing details of conditions at MCI-Norfolk, available at www.realcostofprisons.org/writing].