

I want to share with you a little about what is going on inside MCI-Norfolk and other state prisons in Massachusetts.

Saturday morning, we woke up to find a memo had been slipped under our doors in the middle of the night announcing that we would be locked down for at least fourteen days. A lock down is different from one institution to another based on how a facility is built. At many prisons, people will be confined to their cells for most of the day. In some cases that means being locked into a tiny space with another person, or up to five other people. Here at Norfolk, due to fire safety restrictions, we cannot be locked inside our cells. We are, however, locked into our individual halls. In my case, I am locked in with thirteen other men.

During a lock down, security staff do all the jobs that we would normally do, such as preparing and delivering food, cleaning, etc. In this situation that actually puts us at higher risk of contracting the virus. The only way the virus will come in and be spread is if it is carried in by a staff member. From cooking our meals to providing us with toilet paper and soap, everything we receive now is first handled by the people most likely to have the virus. Yesterday was the first day since the crisis began that I have seen most staff members wearing masks to help protect from the spread. And, since the lock down began, there have been no cleaning supplies available for us to clean our cells or common areas. While the administration had been sending around crews (staffed by prisoners) to disinfect the common areas and hallways of each unit, there has been no such spraying since Friday.

At the Massachusetts Treatment Center, a medium security prison in the Bridgewater complex, there are many confirmed COVID-19 cases. The news this morning reported three people had died at that prison. My mother heard from a friend of mine at the prison who said that the outbreak was bad -- far worse than what the news reported. He shared that the staff were concerned that a much higher number of employees were presumed positives than the DOC was sharing. I have also heard that there are positive COVID-19 cases at the medium security prison in Shirley.



With three deaths, the Massachusetts DOC has only two fewer deaths as of this morning than the entire federal Bureau of Prisons. Due to the deaths and ongoing threat, the US Attorney General has ordered the BOP to quickly expand emergency releases to include all those most threatened by the Coronavirus, even while the entire BOP system is locked down.

Massachusetts, by contrast, has taken a much different approach. The Supreme Judicial Court ruled Friday that they would encourage county jails to release only those detainees who were charged with a non-violent crime and who had not yet gone to trial. Beyond that, the SJC said that it had no power to release post-sentenced people in jails and prisons. It was a cowardly failing by the state's high court not to act to save lives. Instead, as has become far too common in Massachusetts, the court punted the issue to the other two branches of government. Some legislators have an emergency bill drafted, but it seems difficult to believe that the legislature can act fast enough (if at all) to protect the most vulnerable prisoners in the DOC. Governor Baker has already said that he does not support the release of prisoners due to the Coronavirus. These people fail to see the public health crisis bubbling up inside prisons. They seem to be saying that punishing people is FAR more important than protecting people's lives.

The SJC's decision and the DOC's ongoing actions have severely enflamed the climate inside the prison. The ripples of how the DOC is handling the Coronavirus will be visible for years to come. Prisoners who had been very active in facilitating positive activities are now turning firmly against the systems they have long tried to work within. One man, who I consider to be a very level-headed and reserved person, said Friday night, "F these people. F them all." The thought was echoed in each of the discouraged and scared conversations I heard that night. One other man may have summed it up best for me. "They have been trying to tell me for years that I am not a real person. I finally got the message."

Unlike anything else that I have experienced in my almost 15 years of incarceration, the Coronavirus crisis has shown the top-to-bottom failings of mass incarceration. We have facilities that are set up like petri dishes; officials who lack the courage to act; and policies that only dehumanize



people. There have long been cracks in the criminal punishment system. Now, those cracks have become fissures. Unfortunately, there are not enough leaders who possess the ability to address this crisis head on. Instead, the same old weak Spackle is brought out to try to patch the problems. That will not work this time. It must not.

I was thumbing through my copy of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* this morning, unable really to read. I happened upon the following words that I think express how I feel this morning:

"This wall hears, sees and will not. It might open and save you. No.

This wall is a judge."

The wall judges those of us on the inside as not to be real people. Therefore, the wall believes that we do not deserve mercy; we do not deserve to be healthy; we do not deserve life. Our struggles on the inside in some ways are the same as those who live beyond the wall and in other ways are very different. Those of us who are locked-up by the state do not ask for special treatment; we ask for equal treatment. Yes, we want to be safe. Yes, we want to be healthy. But most of all, we want to be seen as human beings.

Thank you for your support. Thank you for your genuine concern. Thank you for seeing me and my neighbors as people.