

The Dehumanization of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections

By Brian D. Knippers

I don't remember the exact day this all started, but we were locked down in early March. One morning we woke to a notice posted in our dormitory that stated we were all to be locked down until further notice. The correctional officer working our block told us the entire prison was being locked down to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Being in prison with incarcerated people who ask a lot of questions has its benefits. We spoke with every sergeant, lieutenant and captain that walked through our unit. We were given a standard response that I'm sure was being used across the entirety of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, "We're following CDC guidelines." This became the rote explanation for thousands of women and men locked in a cage.

Then something happened that changed our lives. News broadcasts indicated that the virus was being transmitted—at record pace—throughout the world. One day we were free to move around the prison, the following day we're confined to our cells/housing units. What changed? It's true the rest of the world was self-quarantining, and dealing with the ensuing havoc caused by the pandemic, but not us. There were no positive cases of Covid here at NCCI-Gardner. So why were we being locked down for our own safety?

We watched spring turn to summer from our dirty windows. The land around us became a riot of green, and our dormitories grew unbearably hot. The sun shone down upon us as we sat around watching television, reading and trying to stay in shape. Each day seemed ominous and never ending. With this additional layer of confinement, many of us began to suffer from depression. A type of depression derived from boredom.

After months of feeling as if we were trapped indoors, we were cleared to go to the yard. I have to admit, this made a big difference in my mental state. I hadn't realized how much I missed being outdoors. The smell of fresh cut grass, the breeze through the leaves, the sun kissing my face, it all amounted to a small taste of freedom. We were relieved to be outdoors again. Months had come and gone since our prison wide lock down, and it was now late June. Still, we'd somehow managed to evade Covid here at Gardner. NCCI-Gardner was now considered the "flagship prison" within the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. The poster child for good practices when it came to keeping the virus at bay.

July, August, September and October rolled by without incident. The chow hall opened back up and we were no longer being fed inside our units. We welcomed the chance to go for three short walks a day to pick up our meals.

While we lived in our Covid-free bubble, other prisons in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections were being hammered with Covid-19. There were cases of the virus at MCI-Framingham, MCI-Norfolk, MCI-Shirley, MCI-Concord, MCI-Walpole, Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center, and all facilities on

the grounds of Old Colony Correctional Center. Many minimum security prisons and county jails were dealing with the same problem. Yet, here we stood. Not a single case of Covid among the members of our prison population. It felt like we were immune to a pandemic plaguing society.

November crept in and the weather grew colder. This particular November would forever change our lives. On November 14th, we first got word an incarcerated person here at NCCI-Gardner had tested positive for Covid-19. The incarcerated person who tested positive lived in I-Building, a dormitory housing unit. The entire unit was tested and almost half the unit came back Covid positive. The thought at that time was that the virus could be contained with a little forward thinking. We faced another lengthy lock down, but we'd survive. Our mood was sullen, but we were at the one prison in Massachusetts that had been granted ample time to prepare for this inevitable crisis. Covid had arrived at Gardner—the horizon had been defeated—but we were ready, right?

The lock down we were anticipating never happened. We were only locked down for two days before we started walking through the chow hall again. Rumors abound as to the logic behind this decision. It seems such a basic step to not bring the entire population of the prison to a central location over the course of an hour and a half. In other words, one unit walks through the chow hall, then the next, then the next, and so forth until everyone receives their meal. No one has an answer as to why we were locked down for three months with no cases of Covid here, and then let out of our units almost immediately following the first confirmed case(s). Better yet, why were we allowed to congregate in a central location, period? How does that follow any of the guidelines established by the CDC?

To give you a better idea of what we were up against, the chow hall's this massive vacuous space. There's no air flow and the temporary dividers built between the two service lines are a joke. Incarcerated people from all over the prison touch railings, walls and countertop surfaces. There's often communal cups of plastic-ware at the end of the line. I reach into to grab a plastic spoon/fork and accidentally touch three or four other spoons/forks in the process.

Another reason for isolating incarcerated people—once there's a confirmed case of Covid in a prison—is all the people you randomly bump into walking around. Here at NCCI-Gardner, diabetics walk up “the hill” to reach the medical unit for their thrice daily insulin shots. The time they leave their housing units changes based on the prison's movement schedule. However, on my way to chow hall I often bump into a diabetic I know. We always stop on the walkway and catch up. This is an incarcerated person I've known for years, it would be rude not to say hello.

Please consider this, there are dozens of these encounters between incarcerated people every day. You can't schedule multiple movements simultaneously and expect to stop the transmission of a highly contagious virus? It's not difficult to understand something fundamental is lacking here, maybe it's a lack of concern for our well-being.

What really emboldens my argument is that the administrators of the prison have a clear view of these interactions taking place outside their office windows.

Initially, thirty men had tested positive for Covid-19 in I-Building. That number continued to climb day after day. The quarantine of the initial thirty incarcerated people wasn't effective. Other incarcerated

people in I-Building had already contracted Covid. Their viral load was almost negligible so their test results came back negative.

Within a week there were over 100 confirmed cases of Covid-19 here at NCCI-Gardner. The virus was multiplying exponentially and we were forced to expose ourselves to Covid if we wanted to eat. Refusing to go to the chow hall is equivalent to starvation for many of these incarcerated individuals. Faced with potential starvation, we risk exposure to a deadly virus.

In December, incarcerated people on our floor—the third floor of Thompson Hall—began to cough and complain of shortness of breath. People I'd never heard complain a day in their lives were asking for aspirin because they had pounding headaches. Other people were experiencing dizziness and chest pains. The symptoms were wide spread and varied greatly from person to person.

A number of men were laid up in their cells coughing. The spread of Covid on our tier happened with lightning rapidity. Within days it seemed as if everyone was showing symptoms. One incarcerated person said he'd lost his sense of taste and smell. He was given a test for Covid and he tested positive. And still, we were free to move about "the cabin." A couple days later, an older gentleman named ██████████ passed out while playing pool. The medical staff responded to the code. Fortunately, ██████████ was conscious when he was removed from our tier. We found out later his oxygen levels had dropped dangerously low due to Covid-19.

We were eventually locked in our cells after ██████████ hit the deck. The following night we were given an instant Covid test. 120 out of 130 incarcerated people on our floor tested positive. The ten guys who tested negative were moved to another building. Here's the irony, they locked us all in our cells after we tested positive. We were fed in, locked in, and a one man crew sprayed the hallways. Everyone on Thompson-3 now had Covid—even the regulars (correctional officers) that worked the tier—and they chose this moment to lock us in our cells.

The 120 positive tests in December brought the number of Covid positive incarcerated people at NCCI-Gardner to around 300. Those were confirmed cases of the virus, although I'm sure there were carriers that hadn't yet tested positive. This is an inexact number, but it's closer to the truth than anything you'll read on the Massachusetts Department of Corrections Covid Dashboard. NCCI-Gardner, in coordination with the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, was reporting around 50 total confirmed cases of Covid at NCCI-Gardner around this time. This was not an accurate number.

Gardner was consumed by Covid-19. We were chewed up, spit out and eventually swallowed whole. Over 200 incarcerated people here at NCCI-Gardner petitioned for medical parole. Many of these people had chronic care conditions that put them at a higher risk of dying, or suffering from ongoing medical issues. Most of these incarcerated people had home plans in place that should have been approved by the parole board. Of every incarcerated person that applied for medical parole, I know of only one person here at Gardner that was granted medical parole. One? Only one human being.

How many women and men in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections died as a result of contracting this virus? What's the real number? Could the indifference of a custodian be viewed as negligence? Incarcerated people in custody died as a result of indifference? Was enough done to prevent women and men from dying in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections?

When the question of medical parole was raised, Carol Mici went on record saying she could keep us safe within our overcrowded prisons. She said that systems were in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in the Massachusetts DOC. What a bold-faced lie that turned out to be.

As we witnessed firsthand, the Coronavirus branched out to every housing unit here at NCCI-Gardner. We now have the highest number of Covid-19 cases in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections.

How does a prison go from being the poster child for Covid prevention, to having the highest number of Covid cases in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections? I'm attributing this claim to a 60 day window, from November 14th, 2020 to January 13th, 2021.

Why wasn't information—in regards to stopping the transmission of Covid-19—passed on from one prison to another in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections? This tragedy was preventable. I keep coming back to one question. How many incarcerated women and men would still be alive today if someone cared enough to institute basic safety guidelines?

From my window, I have a clear view of the back door of the health services unit. Every night here at NCCI-Gardner I hear the familiar, "beep, beep, beep," of an ambulance backing up to bring another incarcerated person to the hospital. I watch as the corrections officers stand around laughing before the medical attendants load another one of my friends into the back of a meat wagon. These are my friends, people I share my life with, people I care about, what can be done to prevent this abuse of power? Is there no end to the dehumanization of incarcerated people?

JANUARY 2021