

Five inmates at the Weber County jail have coronavirus



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Weber County Sheriff Complex entrance Thursday, September 15 2011. Weber County Jail faced a federal audit and failed in several areas, forcing them to give up housing ICE detainees and likely costing the jail as much as \$1.6 million next year in federal money.

By Jessica Miller

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The coronavirus is continuing to spread throughout Utah's county jails, with Weber County officials reporting that five inmates and one employee have tested positive for the virus. Officials believe that the virus first entered the jail after a federal inmate from Nevada was transferred to Weber County. The jail has contracts to hold both federal inmates and those arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Lt. Josh Marigoni said Tuesday that the federal inmate had a cough, but he reported to medical officials that it was a chronic cough due to a medical condition. He was placed in a receiving unit, not in an isolation or quarantine unit. Four days later, the inmate asked to be seen by medical professionals because his cough had worsened.

He was tested for COVID-19 then and separated from the other inmates.

"Our medical contractor as well as our staff members have been amazing through this pandemic and these trying times," he said. "We are doing everything we can to keep our staff, the inmates, and the community safe."

Bronson Dean, who is incarcerated at the Weber County jail, told The Salt Lake Tribune in an email that he is in a unit that was exposed and is on lockdown. He was upset that jail officials did not keep the federal inmate separate and believes he has gotten others sick.

“It’s simply not possible to practice social distancing in here,” Dean wrote, “where we eat, sleep and live in tight quarters with each other at all times. Many of us feel that the system is playing Russian roulette with our lives to keep a bed filled that they get paid for.”

Weber County is not the only jail experiencing a coronavirus outbreak in Utah. Washington County officials reported last week that 15 inmates have tested positive there. There has also been cases reported at the Salt Lake County jail and a halfway house in Salt Lake City.

The Utah State Prison has had three confirmed cases at its Draper facility. It reported Tuesday that 14 of its prisoners who are held at the Washington County jail through a contract with the state have also tested positive — a number that is concerning to the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah.

The ACLU sued the prison and county jails in early March over how they were responding to the coronavirus outbreak, but the Utah Supreme Court tossed the lawsuit. The organization has continued to express concern that prison officials aren’t doing enough to ensure that those inmates being housed in county jails are being kept safe and that proper precautions are being taken to stop the coronavirus from entering jail walls.

“Many county jails in Utah are unable to individually quarantine prisoners in the event of an outbreak, a key measure in stopping the spread in congregate facilities,” said Sara Wolovick, an ACLU Equal Justice Works fellow. “We also receive repeated complaints that corrections officers at some jails rarely wear masks even after evidence shows that mask-wearing significantly slows the spread of the virus.”

Utah jailers in April defended how they were handling the coronavirus pandemic in a response to the ACLU-led lawsuit, saying they’ve increased cleanings, promoted social distancing and created space to quarantine inmates who have been exposed. They also noted that inmate population numbers were at historic lows.

Prison officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Tuesday.