

59 inmates test positive for coronavirus in outbreak at Washington County jail

One inmate was briefly hospitalized, jail says

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SALT LAKE CITY — Nearly 60 of about 300 inmates at the Washington County jail have tested positive for the coronavirus as COVID-19 cases continue to rise statewide.

The jail tested several men after a handful in its intake unit began showing symptoms over the weekend, said Jake Schultz, chief deputy in the Washington County Sheriff's Office.

Those inmates tested positive, along with several others being held in the same area. Still more who had recently moved to two other parts of the jail were confirmed to have the virus, Schultz said, along with others they came into contact with at the jail.

"That's kind of how the domino effect started," Schultz said.

Schultz said the outbreak reflects rising rates of the virus in southwestern Utah, where cases more than tripled in June to a total of 1,500, according to the Utah Department of Health.

"If there's a dramatic increase in the community, there's obviously a higher risk that one of those people are going to be brought to the facility," he said. Previously, just one inmate tested positive, and that was in May, Schultz said.

The ACLU of Utah and others have raised concerns that crowded jail conditions could invite a deadly outbreak. The Utah Supreme Court in May rejected a bid from the ACLU and other groups to secure the release of more defendants, ruling the groups were not directly affected by the problems but others who are can sue.

Utah's prison and jail systems have not yet reported any virus-related deaths.

In Washington County, about 10 of the 59 inmates confirmed to have the virus showed symptoms at the time they were tested, with a handful more developing a cough, fever or other symptoms in following days. They are being held in quarantine, meaning they are not permitted to leave their housing area unless absolutely necessary and are being evaluated daily by medical workers at the Purgatory Correctional Facility, Schultz said.

One inmate deemed high risk was hospitalized over the weekend for breathing problems but was released within an hour or two and brought back to the jail, Schultz added. He said employees are keeping a close eye on those seen as more vulnerable.

Another 59 inmates have tested negative but are also in quarantine as a precaution, Schultz said.

He noted the jail has taken precautions to reduce chances of an outbreak, like suspending programs and recreational activities, providing extra soap at no cost, and boosting efforts to disinfect rooms.

And while it usually holds about 150 more inmates, the jail has booked fewer people on low-level offenses, a move to free up room in the event of an outbreak. It is holding defendants in misdemeanor cases only when they are charged with domestic violence, DUI or offenses Schultz says are deemed serious enough to warrant incarceration.

So far, the jail has tested about 2/3 of its total population of just over 300. More than 90 tests still are pending.

A total of 17 prison inmates — with 14 being housed at county jails — have tested positive, and two have recovered, according to data from the Utah State Prison.

A spokeswoman for the Salt Lake County Jail, which has also confirmed cases among inmates and employees, did not respond to a request for current numbers Wednesday.