

Family, friends of inmates gather at Washington County jail, site of COVID-19 outbreak

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"Getting arrested should not be a death sentence."

That sentence was a common refrain at the Purgatory Correctional Facility, Washington County's jail, on Friday night, when family and friends of inmates with COVID-19 joined to share testimonials and hold a vigil for their loved ones.

Officials at the facility confirmed that, as of Friday night, there were 94 inmates there who have contracted COVID-19 — nearly a third of the facility's entire population.

Event organizer Sydni Makemo opened by speaking about how the vigil was meant to show support for inmates with COVID-19 and those who are forced to cohabitate with them.

"We want to stand here in solidarity with those that are in there that have contracted COVID, those who are in there who are still going to contract COVID," Makemo said. "All of the people that are in jails and prisons that couldn't make the choices that we made to protect themselves and protect their lives."



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Community members gather at Purgatory Correctional Facility to stand in solidarity with inmates infected with COVID-19 Friday, July 3, 2020. (Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

Families in attendance spoke up to talk about struggles that inmates were facing inside the jail, arguing that although they are incarcerated, they are real people, with real feelings and real fears.

Officials with the Washington County Sheriff's Office were on hand as well, saying they understood the families' frustrations, but that they also believed some had been fed misinformation about the conditions inside the jail.

Powerful testimonies and eye-opening revelations were made as these families processed grief and fear for the health of their loved ones in the moment.

Here is what they shared.

'This should not happen'



Christine (left) and Lisa (right) Visser speak about their family member Brian Visser and fear they feel for his wellbeing at Purgatory Correctional Facility in Hurricane. (Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

The first people to step in front of the audience of a few dozen at the correctional facility were Christine and Lisa Visser, the wife and sister of Brian Visser, an inmate.

The Vissers spoke about how for someone like Brian, who has Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, contracting COVID-19 is extremely dangerous.

"His heart is only working at 40%, so we're really scared for him right now because we know he's not getting the medical attention that he actually needs," Christine Visser said. "We ask him 'are you breathing okay?' and 'do you have your inhaler?' so it's quite scary because they're skipping on his heart medication, which is damaging his heart. It's scary and we just want him out."

Lisa Visser drove from California to show support for her brother and on Friday, which was also her birthday, she spoke about what she believes is negligence on the part of health professionals charged with taking care of Brian.

"He continuously, every single month, goes between five to 10 days without his heart medication," Lisa Visser said. "We have to constantly remind the doctor and got through his attorney to remind the doctor to get him his heart medication. This shouldn't happen, this should not happen."

Inmates who came to the facility prepared to deal with the virus were also stripped and rendered defenseless against COVID-19, said Stephanie Root, whose 25-year-old son Evan is incarcerated there.

"He came down here from Salt Lake County Jail with a mask that was removed upon arrival and he was not given another one even though he asked," Root said. "He was put in a cell with a person who was experiencing symptoms and people in the two cells around him were also experiencing symptoms."

Root said that her son asked multiple times if he could wear t-shirts or tank tops around his face to protect himself but was told that he could only wear those in the cell and not around other people.

"They basically told him 'you cannot protect yourself' and now he's infected," Root said. "He's not sick and he does have some very mild symptoms but that doesn't mean it couldn't change tomorrow."

Several of those in attendance said their family members who contracted COVID did not receive masks until after they tested positive.

Despite efforts from facility workers, the families of the inmates felt that health protections for their family members were not adequate.

Purgatory response



Community members gather at Purgatory Correctional Facility to stand in solidarity with inmates infected with COVID-19 Friday, July 3, 2020. (Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

There were a handful of watchful eyes on the group gathered outside of the facility for their vigil, including Jake Schultz, Chief Deputy for the Purgatory Correctional Facility. Schultz said he wanted to make it clear that he takes the perspectives of each of the families seriously and understands why they are frustrated.

"We encourage them to take advantage of their right to gather and we understand why families are concerned," Schultz said. "People that they love are in here and when you're friends and family, it's kind of a helpless feeling because you can't directly affect what's going on. Everything has to be facilitated through us, and that can be frustrating."

One concern for Schultz about the event was what he called "misinformation" in the way that the families spoke about conditions their inmate was facing.

An example of that misinformation? The assertion by one family member that the inmates weren't receiving hot water.

"I heard somebody say that they don't have hot water, which is absolutely false," Schultz said. "We didn't turn the hot water off and things like that. When they say they're not seeing medical, that's not true because medical is down there multiple times a day."

Schultz said that the medical staff is doing oxygen checks, temperature checks and treating symptoms as they're reported.

Of the 94 inmates that have tested positive, Schultz confirmed that only 15 showed symptoms and it has been difficult to treat for that reason.

Schultz said he sympathizes with the families despite their lack of comprehensive knowledge of the situation from inside.

"There's a lot of misinformation about what is and isn't happening back there, which only compounds it and makes them a little more concerned than is probably necessary," Schultz said. "Again, we understand why they feel the way that they feel."

'They aren't criminals, they're addicts'



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Some families of people currently in the facility feel as if their loved ones are needlessly facing infection without actually having committed a crime to put them in there.

The words of Moana Hamilton were illuminating as her brother, James Hamilton, and best friend's son, Justin Kirby, are in the facility awaiting rehabilitation for drug addiction.

"They're both awaiting drug rehab and that's what they're sitting in here for, not because they're doing their time but because they're waiting for feds to rehabilitate them," Hamilton said. "My brother, James Hamilton, has two little girls that are sitting in state custody waiting for him to come home."

Others said that while they have faith in the justice system, they have issues with how their family members have been treated since getting locked up.

Marcie Freed spoke to the crowd about her son Derek, who has a drug addiction.

Freed acknowledged that even with her staunch belief in the system, it's hard to remain positive once you watch those social systems fail to protect your loved ones.

"I trust our system, I trust our government and I trust our law so it's hard when I find that we didn't really get COVID until a lot later than other states and that we had time to put protocol into place here," Freed said. "I cannot justify the lack of prisoners having masks."

Having a family as an inmate in a prison that has an active outbreak of COVID-19 is stressful enough, and Hamilton said the way that the inmates are treated compounds the emotional difficulty.

"They're waiting for drug treatment so these people are not criminals in here, not all of them, they're addicts that just need treatment and need help," Hamilton said. "Heaven forbid we cage up a bunch of dogs in the heat and we get shunned but we can put our family in places like these with diseases and pandemics that can kill them and then say, 'don't worry, just wait it out'."

Several other people came up to share stories about family members either in the Purgatory Correctional Facility or incarcerated elsewhere in the United States.

What they were advocating for — adequate health and safety conditions against disease and comprehensive rehabilitation — remained the same as the speakers changed.

Still, by the end of the night, their fight had coalesced into a single message.

"The thing to remember is that getting arrested should not be a death sentence," Makemo said. "Dying in jail is the worst way to go."