

Purgatory turns corner as positive COVID-19 test numbers drop following outbreak

Written by Cody Blowers

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ST. GEORGE — Following the COVID-19 outbreak at Purgatory Correctional Facility last month, Washington County Sheriff's Chief Deputy Jake Schultz said they are seeing a decline in the number of inmates testing positive.

Schultz said that testing has been ongoing since the middle of June when the outbreak was first reported, and the jail's efforts are starting to pay off with the drop in positive tests.

"Just today, we have turned a corner and are receiving more negative test results back," he said, adding they were waiting on test results for 96 inmates. On Tuesday night, the tests revealed that 54 of the inmates were negative and were subsequently returned to general population.

In all, he said the facility has 100 inmates who have tested positive since testing began in June. Of those, 42 cases are active, meaning the inmates are going through a 14-day period in quarantine.

The remaining 58 inmates are in recovery or are those who tested positive at the onset of the outbreak and have already gone through the 14-day period in quarantine. These inmates are now in the recovery unit awaiting further testing, and once they receive a negative test, they will be returned to general population.

The outbreak at Purgatory also affected overall numbers for the county, which saw an uptick in the overall number of people infected recently, Southwest Utah Department of Health spokesperson David Heaton said, adding that the outbreak at Purgatory is similar to what authorities are finding in facilities all over the state.

A jail facility is really no different than a long-term care or treatment facility in many ways, he said, which creates the perfect environment for the virus to do "what it is really good at — it spreads."

"It's indoors, where people can be tightly quartered," Heaton said. "And even with all of the precautions we can take — by nature, viruses do spread."

It's similar to trying to stop the common cold from spreading, he explained. Once the virus gets into a closed facility like that, "the chances of it spreading are higher — there's no way around that."

To that end, corrections staff were focused on keeping the virus out of the facility altogether, an effort they've been engaged in since March.

Once it entered the facility, the virus spread rapidly, as was expected, and jail staff responded quickly by implementing a plan that was already in place. That herculean task, Heaton said, was made even more difficult due to the nature of the virus, which is a double-edged sword.

Many people who become infected with the virus do not show any symptoms, which is a good thing, Heaton said; otherwise, there would be a higher number of sick inmates, a situation that could be very difficult to manage in a jail environment.

On the other hand, he said, that also means that people can be walking around who are contagious and infecting others without even being aware of it.

As a result, extra precautions have become routine at the facility. In fact, Schultz said, the jail has gone above and beyond the CDC's recommendations.

“The CDC recommends a 10-day quarantine for those who test positive for the virus,” he said. “But we are keeping any positive inmates in quarantine for even longer than that.”

“They do not return to general population until they test negative — period,” Schultz said.

Moreover, special care was taken with high-risk inmates, or those with medical conditions such as compromised immune systems. Several of these inmates tested positive for the virus, but jail officials say none became ill.

“We have no active cases in the high-risk group,” Schultz said, adding there are a few inmates in quarantine who suffered “minor symptoms” and one high-risk inmate who was transported to the hospital, primarily as a precaution. Once the inmate was cleared at the hospital, he returned to the facility shortly thereafter.

The compartmentalizing of the inmates was made possible thanks to a drop in the number of inmates being housed at the facility, largely due to restricted arrest protocols that were put in place months ago. With inmate numbers down, the jail was able to set up four special housing units to separate those inmates who tested positive for the virus from others who were not infected.

Another step the facility has taken involved the purchase of a special cleaning product capable of removing the coronavirus from floors and other surfaces, and it is designed to protect those surfaces from becoming recontaminated with the virus.

That solution has been used for routine maintenance and cleaning throughout the facility for weeks, Schultz said, at a cost of \$200 per gallon. So far, the facility has purchased 55 gallons of the cleaner, spending more than \$11,000 on that one product alone.

“It’s the best solution out there and went for \$500 a gallon, but we were able to get it for \$200,” Schultz said, adding that those costs are in addition to the regular cleaning and maintenance costs that were already included in the budget.

It doesn’t end there. Since March, the facility has purchased 4,000 gloves, 1,000 masks, 16 gallons of hand sanitizer and 600 protective gowns, which is in addition to the stock the facility typically keeps on hand.

The jail got a boost Tuesday when a research team from California arrived at the facility to conduct testing on the antibodies produced by the body when it is infected with COVID-19.

The team was there to collect data by taking blood samples from those inmates who still needed to be tested, or those who needed to be retested, and the results are used by the team to analyze the antibodies created.

The team tests for the virus using a blood test, which is capable of differentiating if the virus is active in the body or if it is the residual leftover after the body has fought off the illness. That residual is typically the antibodies created during the process, and that data is collected by the research team.

There are other testing processes that are not as specific, two of which involve taking a mouth or nasal swab; however, that process will only reveal a positive or negative test and doesn’t distinguish whether it is the active virus or the traces of the virus left behind.

Schultz said the facility has “done hundreds and hundreds of coronavirus tests up to this point,” so having the research team there means they are conducting and covering the cost of the testing, making it a win-win for everyone.

Even with the spike in negative test results, Schultz said there is still work to do to stay on top of the situation and reduce the risk of an inmate who has the virus from slipping through the cracks.

With that in mind, he said the goal is to begin testing as soon as an inmate leaves intake and before they are placed in a housing block. Testing inmates as soon as they enter the booking process “just isn’t realistic,” Schultz said, being that many are released soon after they arrive, so even if they tested that individual, they would likely be released before the results came back.

A vigil organized by the ACLU of Utah was held in front of the jail Friday in response to the outbreak and was attended by about 30 participants out of concern for their incarcerated loved ones. Schultz said the entire administrative staff was on hand during the vigil to answer any questions, adding that it was “very organized and went well.” He said the public’s concerns are valid, the importance of which is not lost on those running the facility.

Heaton said the outbreak at the jail left the staff with “quite a situation” on their hands.

“They did a great job in managing a difficult situation,” he said. “They were dealing with a virus that loves to spread and is good at it.”