

ACLU Of Utah Wants More Transparency From Department Of Corrections After Inmate Dies From COVID-19

The Department of Corrections reported an 82-year-old man at the Utah State Prison died of COVID-19-related issues this week.

<https://www.kuer.org/health-science-environment/2020-11-05/aclu-of-utah-wants-more-transparency-from-department-of-corrections-after-inmate-dies-from-covid-19>

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By Emily Means

Two Utah Department of Corrections facilities are on “modified lockdown” in response to COVID-19 outbreaks.

Kaitlin Felsted, a department spokesperson, said the state prison in Draper is experiencing its [second outbreak](#), while the Central Utah facility in Gunnison is having its first.

As of Tuesday, the Draper prison had 269 active COVID-19 cases, and the Gunnison facility had 21.

State epidemiologist Dr. Angela Dunn said during a press conference Thursday, the Utah Department of Health is working closely with the corrections department and the Salt Lake County Health Department to address the outbreaks.

“We are doing regular testing of where the outbreaks are occurring, in addition to all incoming inmates and staff,” Dunn said. “We’re working with the prison to appropriately cohort people who are exposed and people who are infected to limit the spread.”

As for separating people who test positive from those who don’t, Felsted said a lot goes into deciding whether to move someone.

“Our staff have to also consider other criteria for movement of an incarcerated individual, including documented safety concerns, gang affiliations, [Americans with Disabilities Act] accommodations and other medical conditions unrelated to COVID-19,” she said.

On Wednesday, the corrections department announced its first COVID-19-related death at the state prison.

The incarcerated person was 82-years-old and had underlying health conditions. He was housed in the Oquirrh 5 unit, where medically vulnerable people stay. That unit has been heavily impacted during this latest outbreak, with a reported 59 cases on Tuesday.

Sara Wolovick with the ACLU of Utah believes the man’s death was preventable.

“The prison has consistently stated they have extra protocols in place to protect people in Oquirrh 5,” Wolovick said. “Despite all of that, [the virus] still got in, and an 82-year-old man died. This really raises the question, what else is the department committed to doing to make sure that there aren’t even more infections?”

In a [press release](#), the corrections department said the man tested positive but wasn’t experiencing any symptoms until the time of his death. A medical examiner has yet to determine the official cause of death.

Felsted said medical staff are monitoring inmates in outbreak areas as well as providing on-site medical and mental health care.

But Wolovick said the Department of Corrections needs to be more transparent about how they’re checking on people with COVID-19.

“If their practice is to wait for people who are sick to come to them and tell them they need help, that’s not really safe,” she said. “Especially with the people from Oquirrh 5 who are much more likely to be seriously ill and who might not recognize they are seriously ill. Some of them have dementia, and they’re elderly,” she said.

Wolovick said the ACLU has urged the department to do medical furloughs for incarcerated people, through house arrest and ankle monitors, to protect people who are the most medically vulnerable.