

Some Utah inmates get early homecoming, others fear the worst as virus spreads in prison

Of more than 600 Utah inmates to test positive, one has died

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Carrie Knowlton hugs husband Michael Knowlton after he was released from the Utah State Prison in Draper on Tuesday Nov. 3, 2020. Some inmates are being granted early release because of coronavirus outbreaks. *Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News*

DRAPER — A grinning Michael Knowlton stepped out of a Utah Department of Corrections van and into the arms of his wife last week, a reunion sweeter and earlier than they had imagined.

Knowlton, 35, tested positive for COVID-19 in October during an initial outbreak at the Utah State Prison. He had no symptoms early on but finds himself wheezing on and off a month later.

“I felt bad for all the people around me that are suffering, because they don’t really get help or nothing,” he said as he and Carrie Knowlton embraced outside the prison’s Draper administrative offices on Tuesday. “Everything they put on the news saying that they’re doing, they’re not doing.”

Knowlton is not alone. He was among more than 600 at the prison's Draper and Gunnison sites who have tested positive for the virus, with slightly more than half now considered recovered. The first to die, an 82-year-old inmate living in a section for older men with health problems was found with no pulse on Wednesday.

Knowlton, freed early because he had a parole date for his drug offense within six months, is one of more than 1,000 inmates who have left the prison gates early, a move by the state to open up room there and limit spread of the virus. Corrections officials have said they are proud that employees staved off an outbreak for more than six months and have stepped up to help contain the spread.

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But many who remain incarcerated fear the worst.

Cathy Linford has spent several months advocating for the early release of her son, Calvin Hansen, but her effort became more urgent after the virus spread to the dormitory-style Promontory section where he lives.

"I am so scared because he has really bad asthma," she said. "It's literally gasoline to the fire in there." Linford said the prison is no longer moving men out of the section if they test positive because it has run out of room to do so, an assertion the Corrections Department disputes.

Hansen, 30, is serving time on a probation violation, but the timeline could be longer. He must complete a counseling program before he can leave, but it's on hold as therapists and others are barred from entering the prison due to the outbreak, his mother said.

The Corrections Department maintains it does isolate those confirmed to have the virus.

"The department continues to collaborate closely with state and local health officials from both regions on movement and testing, which includes separating negative cases from positive cases," spokeswoman Kaitlin Felsted said.

Felsted noted that health concerns are not the only consideration in relocating inmates: gang affiliations, disability accommodations and other medical or safety concerns also factor in.

Loved ones have called attention in recent months to what they have said are poor conditions for inmates: cleaning supplies and cloths available only to those who can pay, guards who won't wear masks and retribution for those who complain.

Carrie Knowlton was among them, pushing back against statements from corrections officials that each prisoner is receiving adequate care.

On Tuesday, Knowlton held a sign saying, "Welcome home, now kiss me," and acknowledged having jitters as she waited to drive her husband home to Midvale.

"It's a big day," she said.

Her husband and another inmate, who asked his name be withheld for fear of reprisal from corrections officials, said the prison had been shuffling inmates often from one area to the next, a factor they believe played a role in the spread across different sections at the prison in Draper.

"Basically, to me, it looks like they're just trying to get everybody infected, and then see what happens, and then they can be done with it," Knowlton said.

The Wasatch facility, where he was held, was the first to record an outbreak in late September. Those who needed medical help could only summon attention by attempting to flag down an officer who happened to walk by, he recalled. Knowlton said cockroaches scurried across the hallways as dirty styrofoam dishes and discarded personal protective equipment piled up in the hall.

Family members and advocates say they fear more will die in the prison.

The Corrections Department has responded to those concerns by saying its infirmaries offer comprehensive on-site medical care but also contract with outside hospitals and clinics for those seriously ill. Felsted said mental health services are also available.

“Medical staff continue to heavily monitor incarcerated individuals in outbreak areas with great emphasis on the Oquirrh 5 facility where the prison’s most medically vulnerable incarcerated individuals reside,” she said.

Sara Wolovick, an attorney with the ACLU of Utah, points out that the man found deceased in Oquirrh 5 Wednesday had several health issues “that likely contributed to his death” and had not reported symptoms, according to the prison.

She said the man’s death was preventable and called for the prison to give specifics on efforts to monitor those with COVID-19. Inmates have relayed to the ACLU that medical workers are not taking their temperature or checking vital signs, Wolovick said.

“The governor’s office, the Department of Corrections and the Board of Parole needed to be — and needs to be — doing everything in their power to get medically vulnerable people out of harm’s way,” Wolovick said. “This raises the question of judgment, really, that this 82-year-old man with comorbidities was in prison in a dorm during a pandemic.”

“There are other people in there who are elderly, with conditions that put them at high risk,” she said, including cancer, emphysema, HIV and heart disease. But it’s not clear how many of those inmates are being granted early release.

In April, the Utah Supreme Court rejected the ACLU’s effort to have certain inmates released, including those older and with health issues. But the group hasn’t ruled out further legal action, Wolovick said.