

# ‘I feel like they’re leaving us in here to die’: Utah prison inmates, families despair as virus spreads

Seven men with COVID-19 — most from a section holding the oldest and most frail — have died

By [Annie Knox@anniebknex](mailto:AnnieKnox@anniebknex)

Nov 20, 2020, 10:00pm MST

<https://www.deseret.com/utah/2020/11/20/21571641/coronavirus-utah-state-prison-covid-19-outbreak-inmates-families-despair-virus-spreading>



Katie Black Wood poses for a photograph outside of her home in Layton on Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020. Wood’s 70-year-old father, Tom Black, is an inmate at the Utah State Prison and has contracted COVID-19. *Spenser Heaps, Deseret News*

SALT LAKE CITY — Tom Black’s hands were trembling so severely, it took him nine attempts to dial his daughter’s number from the Utah State Prison last week.

Black, 70 years old and short of breath, called to say he tested positive for COVID-19, a development his family believes has exacerbated his Parkinson’s disease. Six other inmates who lived in the same wing of about 200 — the prison’s oldest and those in poor health — have died after getting the coronavirus. Black believes he may be next. Once others around him fell sick, he telephoned to discuss his funeral and the money he had saved to cover the cost, said his daughter, Katie Black Wood.

“He says he’s just going to die,” Wood said. “He feels like he’s dying right now. But they haven’t taken him to medical or anything. They’re just letting them get worse, where he can’t even push numbers on a phone.”

When the state confirmed the virus had infiltrated Black's dormitory, advocates and family members ramped up calls for the release of those most susceptible. While the prison has sent home more than 1,100 early in order to free up room, remaining inmates are alleging a lack of medical care, including for older, ill men who have the virus.

Seven men ranging in age from 50 to 82 years old have died after testing positive for COVID-19, with three drawing their final breath this week. Dozens more are hospitalized.

Fellow inmates have reported that a 71-year-old man in the same Oquirrh 5 facility as Black had complained that he couldn't breathe for about four or five days before being hospitalized Nov. 14. They contend he struggled to stand up and had blue lips and fingernails, said Sara Wolovick, an attorney with the ACLU of Utah who has been in touch with those inside the prison. The inmate died Tuesday.

"We've been hearing disturbing reports about people having serious symptoms for days," Wolovick said. "They might have talked to med-techs but are not being taken to the infirmary, so the symptoms just persist."



Katie Black Wood and her father, Tom Black, are pictured in a family photo. *Katie Black Wood*

More than 1,100 prisoners — roughly a quarter of the population at its Draper and Gunnison sites — have tested positive for the virus as of Friday, according to the Utah Department of Corrections. The first outbreak, attributed to an infected medical worker who treated inmates while asymptomatic, began in late September.

In response to a question about protocol for monitoring and caring for sick inmates, the prison reiterated its infirmaries offer comprehensive medical care, with medical employees available around the clock. It also contracts with outside hospitals and clinics for those who need greater care than it can provide.

Prison officials have sought to reassure families, saying they have the proper protective gear and are working with state health managers to ensure inmates are as safe as possible.

“Our staff are committed to your loved ones,” said Jim Hudspeth, deputy corrections director, in a Thursday announcement. He urged trust and patience, saying he recently visited an area housing inmates sick with the virus, and although the prison is short on staff as many recover from the virus or quarantine, employees’ dedication and cleaning job impressed him.

The prison said it’s long had a stepped-up medical presence in Oquirrh 5, and medical workers check on those who have tested positive at least twice a day. It has maintained that anyone who informs employees of discomfort will have access to medication and any other treatment needed.

Calvin Hansen, another inmate sick with the virus and serving time for a probation violation, has a fever, severe headache and cough. But he doesn’t want to ask for help.

“I feel like a truck ran over me,” said Hansen, 30. “I have teeth that have issues, and I feel like I got punched in the face. My joints ache, and I can’t really think straight. I feel like my head is underwater.” He hasn’t asked for more than Tylenol, however, because he’s worried officials will “isolate me in a single-man cell and just leave me in there where I’ll get ignored.”

Hansen applied for compassionate release because he has asthma, which can cause severe complications. But after a deputy warden denied his request, he said the caseworker who was advocating on his behalf declined to keep pursuing the case.

Prior to testing positive last week, he felt he was doing everything he could to protect himself from COVID-19. The prison canceled the programs he normally participates in, so he spent most days on his bunk, wearing a thin mask made by other inmates.

Most others in the same dormitory — including a pair of men with bunks just 2 feet away — had tested positive in the weeks before he did. And his initial tests came back negative. But two days after the prison shuffled him and 18 other negative inmates to a new section, he learned he had the virus.

He’s also worried for older and sicker inmates who are struggling to get the medical care they need.

“They’re providing little to no medical assistance. I feel like they’re leaving us in here to die,” he said.

“I’m terrified. People are just wandering around like zombies.”

Should the 70-year-old Black want to ask for help, his daughter feels he won’t manage to communicate. His illness affects not just his hands but his thinking and memory, so she says he cannot fill out a form to request medical help.

“With COVID, I know he’s really sick. He probably won’t make it,” Wood said. “He’s been gone since I was 19. So I’ve kind of gotten used to this, but this isn’t the way I wanted it to end, because my whole career was helping them get out of prison. It’s just hard to know that he’s going to be gone and there’s nothing I can do.”

Her father has maintained his innocence, a factor she believes has kept him in prison longer than if he had pleaded guilty. A jury in 2003 found him guilty of eight counts of child sexual abuse, a first-degree felony, and he was sentenced to at least 25 years and up to life.

Wood has long advocated to overturn the convictions after she said her father was wrongly accused. She said her efforts stalled in part as DNA evidence didn’t factor into the case.

A botanist who managed greenhouses at BYU for 25 years, Black is a devout Latter-day Saint who long attended services in his own faith and several others at the prison, Wood said.

She believes she has exhausted all avenues in advocating for his release after writing to the Utah Board of Pardons and Parole several times since April and getting in touch with attorneys. She has also pleaded with Gov. Gary Herbert and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for help in expediting the process.

Wood notes her father needs knee surgery and requires a walker to move about, and has a long list of other health issues like diabetes. She volunteered to keep him on house arrest with an ankle monitor at her home in Layton, pledging to install security cameras and hire a probation agency to keep watch while she’s at work.

“I beg you to not let my father die this way,” she wrote to the board in an April email she shared with the Deseret News.

Wood and her father enlisted the help of a social worker, who filed a request for compassionate release in August. The board acknowledged his request that month, an optimistic Black wrote in a letter home. But nearly three months later, the board hasn’t informed them of any determination, Wood said.



8-28-20

Dear Katie, Ben, & Layla:

My birthday went well. I'll probably talk to you on Monday morning, but if not, here's a letter.

I got a few nice presents. An over 65 flu shot.

Remember that I wrote to my case worker on a spiritual prompting to ask if he could tell me how to get a "special attention hearing." People had been pushing me to do it for years, but the spirit never felt right. Suddenly, weeks ago I was so prompted. For my birthday I got a reply. Here's officer Carlodes' reply.

"Hello, I put you in for consideration for a Medical Early Release. When I hear something I will let you know."

I had explained to him how I was weakening daily from my bad knee, parkinsons, diabetes, high blood pressure & cholesterol.

It sounds hopeful but it's no guarantee. I also told him about your jobs and the bedroom you had in a home which fits the parameters needed for the parolee. That's my present.

I love you more than stars

Dad ★  
★ ★

Wolovick, with the ACLU, said the board has failed to release dozens identified for compassionate release because they are dying or very sick, including some who can't complete treatment because virus precautions have shelved the programs.

"These are individuals who the DOC itself recommended to be released," Wolovick said.

Brett Varoz, chief hearing officer with the Utah Board of Pardons and Parole, said his agency must balance an inmate's circumstances against public safety considerations.

Report ad

"You have some individuals, again, who have very serious crimes in the prison, and not everyone is going to be released based on COVID," he said.

Inmates who want to do so have three options.

They can request compassionate release if they have significant health issues or a tragedy occurs in their family, although there are no set requirements and the board reviews applications case by case, Varoz said.

Inmates within six months of their scheduled release can also apply for early parole if they prove they have a place to live.

If they don't meet those criteria, they can seek special review from the parole board, a process usually kickstarted by a person's attorney, although the odds of success are less likely.

Varoz said he fields several calls and emails a day from family members voicing their frustration and concern.

Wood's father previously lived in his own cell. But as a precaution earlier in the year, the prison moved each inmate with serious health problems into the dormitory, with beds 4 feet apart, she said.

Eventually, in October, the virus made its way there, and medical workers began recording her father's temperature and blood oxygen levels.

"Because it was such an open floor and there are so many people, it just went like wildfire through them all," Wood said.

**Contributing:** Amy Donaldson