

Utah inmates are dying from coronavirus, as advocates call for an investigation

Salt Lake Tribune

Nov. 22, 2020

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<https://www.sltrib.com/news/2020/11/20/utah-inmates-are-dying/>

The moment Utah prison officials had feared since the beginning of the pandemic is here.

Hundreds of inmates have tested positive for the coronavirus, a number that is growing every day. Seven men have died in less than three weeks. Dozens have been hospitalized.

Prison officials had been successful for months at keeping the coronavirus out of its two facilities. But as COVID-19 cases have skyrocketed in Utah, the virus crept in for the first time in October — and hasn't left.

The Utah Department of Corrections' handling of how the virus spread has frustrated family members and advocates, who worry that not enough is being done to keep those incarcerated safe. Prisoners have complained of inadequate medical care, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah. The ACLU has received several reports of inmates who said they had not had their temperatures or vital signs checked after testing positive. Family members of inmates say they've only been given two Tylenol pills a day to manage pain.

"We've gotten multiple, serious reports about people complaining of having difficulty breathing, people having low blood oxygen levels and other serious symptoms not getting medical help, or not being taken to the hospital or infirmary for days," said Sara Wolovick, an ACLU Equal Justice Works fellow. "We've heard this is happening with one of the people who died. There needs to be, at this point, an independent investigation and evaluation about the medical care that people are receiving at the prison."

Beth Thompson's husband, Keenan, got the virus in late October, and spent weeks in a cell with another man who was also sick in part of the prison that hadn't been used in years. Thompson said her husband was in pain for weeks as the virus ran its course, and wasn't allowed to leave his cell for more than 30 minutes a day. There was one day, she recalled through tears, that he had to crawl on his hands and knees to the phone so he could call her. All he wanted, he told her, was to hear her voice.

"Every day I was in fear that I was going to get a call that my husband was dead," she said. "That's how bad my husband felt. He told me he felt like death."

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Beth Thompson speaks at a rally for prison inmates, after a COVID-19 outbreak has spread at the Draper prison, at the Department of Corrections, on Tuesday, Oct. 13, 2020.

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Thompson is part of a group planning to protest in front of the prison's administrative building on Sunday afternoon — an effort, she said, to let their loved ones know that people care about them.

“We just want those incarcerated to have their rights fulfilled,” she said. “They’re very minimal, but they still have rights as human beings to proper medical care and no cruel and unusual punishment.”

Another inmate wrote in a letter to The Salt Lake Tribune that he found out he was positive after a guard announced his test results to his entire unit. He gathered his things, he said, and did a “walk of shame” to a new area, where he was in a cell with another sick inmate.

“For the next two weeks, we shared a sickness and a cell together,” he wrote. “Never seeing a doctor or even having our temperatures checked. Just rest and isolation, that was their solution.”

And in the midst of this prison outbreak, the leader of the Department of Corrections announced he would be leaving his post in a few weeks to take over as executive director for the Utah Board of Pardons and Parole.

Mike Haddon, who has been the executive director of the prison since 2018, wrote in a statement that he wasn't asked to step down, but believed the timing of the change felt natural as Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox takes over as governor in January.

“It has truly been a humbling experience to work alongside the men and women who dedicated their careers to public service — specifically serving those who are too often overlooked by society,” Haddon said in a statement.

Deputy Executive Director Jim Hudspeth said Friday that there are 780 active coronavirus cases right now in the Draper and Gunnison facilities. He said that the health and safety of inmates is “of utmost importance” to prison officials, and said that while they are currently understaffed, they are doing all they can to try to limit the spread of the virus.

He said medical staff are working around the clock caring for inmates.

“I have never seen such a strong commitment to people wanting people to be safe and healthy,” he said, “and to do what’s best for the individual, not what’s best sometimes for the department. Or what’s easy for us. Sometimes we have to make hard decisions. And sometimes we make decisions that are best for the individual’s care, because that’s what we are constitutionally mandated to do.”

Prisons across the country have been experiencing deadly COVID-19 outbreaks since the virus started spreading in early March. States like Florida, Texas and Ohio have had hundreds of inmates die, according to The Marshall Project.

While the prisoner death toll is nowhere near that in Utah, the state is somewhat unique in that the outbreak didn't hit until October, more than seven months after the coronavirus started spreading in the state.

Wolovick, with the ACLU of Utah, said corrections officials should have used that time to plan for an inevitable outbreak, including considering more early releases.

“The prisons were always a powder keg,” she said. “We had had the gift of time to prepare. And there were releases, but not enough medically vulnerable people were released.”

The ACLU sued prison officials back in April over their response to the coronavirus, but the lawsuit didn't go far. The Utah Supreme Court dismissed the litigation, saying the group didn't have proper legal standing to bring it to court.

Wolovick said Friday that the current situation at the prison is what they were hoping to prevent.

“We have seen the virus spread like wildfire in facilities that have dorm-style housing and no way to socially distance,” she said. “This is an incredibly dangerous situation. And it was avoidable.”