

Families concerned about handling of COVID at CUCF

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GUNNISON—As COVID-19 continues to take its toll on Sanpete County, the Central Utah Correctional Facility (CUCF) in Gunnison is seeing a surge in cases. And families of some of the prisoners, along with advocacy groups, are raising concerns about the way the virus is being handled in Utah prisons.

As of last week, 216 inmates at the Gunnison prison had been confirmed as carrying the virus. With 3,167 inmates tested so far, that means 6 percent of inmates tested have been positive, with the rate climbing. Sara Wolovick, attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Utah, said her staff had received complaints from families about prisoners with obvious symptoms not receiving prompt medical treatment.

The sister of a CUCF inmate said coronavirus tests were being administered at the facility in an unsanitary manner, heat was being turned off as a strategy to inhibit spread of the virus, and because of staff members becoming ill or being required to quarantine, food service had deteriorated.

“It’s not just a prison issue,” Wolovick said. “A lot of the people who work in the prison live in the community. They can catch it and bring it home.”

Wolovick added, “There have been large outbreaks in prisons in communities all over the country, and we have seen it get into an area and burden the local health resources. With small rural communities that can be very dangerous.”

Wolovick said so far the major concerns have been mostly about the Draper facility and not the CUCF, although she fears the problems and practices at Draper could spread to CUCF.

The main complaint is the inability to effectively quarantine inmates with COVID-19 from the rest of prison population.

“The individuals had been complaining about serious symptoms for days, and even struggling to breathe for days before they were ever taken to infirmaries,” Wolovick told the *Messenger*. “These are stories that have been repeated to us.”

Kaitlin Felsted, spokeswoman for the Utah Department of Corrections (UDC), told the *Messenger* in an email that onsite medical care for inmates is being provided by UDC’s Clinical Services Bureau, which operates infirmaries at both the Utah State Prison in Draper and the CUCF. UDC also contracts with outside hospitals and clinics for the treatment of seriously ill inmates.

“Any incarcerated individual who exhibits symptoms outside the resources of our medical providers will receive care at a nearby hospital,” Felsted wrote. “Our medical staff is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In areas of an outbreak, our medical staff has an active presence on those units at least twice a day to check-in with incarcerated individuals.”

Unlike the Draper prison, the CUCF has not reported any COVID deaths. Nonetheless, Wolovick said her group had received complaints about CUCF as early as spring about inconsistent use of masks among staff while interacting with inmates.

The sister of a CUCF inmate, whom we are referring to as “Lisa” (real name withheld at request), is a member of a support group for the family members of inmates in Utah prisons. She said many people in her group have spoken out about what they feel is irresponsible handling of coronavirus at CUCF.

“We are all very concerned about not only our family members, but the prison staff as well,” Lisa said. “I am worried this is not being approached with education.”

Lisa's brother reportedly told her that the COVID testing at the prison is done by lining up inmates and putting a long swab down their throats, which causes them to cough. The prison staff wears extensive protective gear themselves but wears the same gloves during the entire group testing process.

"That was a real red flag to me," Lisa said. "This is sometimes a mix of positive and negative inmates. The staff has a lot of protective equipment on but what about protection for the inmates? I know that the Health Department also comes in and does testing, too, and when they do it they change their gloves and sanitize after each individual test."

Lisa said her brother told her inmates at CUCF were given two masks back in March and no more since then. Inmates are only allowed to do laundry once weekly, so the two masks, which are made from repurposed cloth, stay dirty for a week, and the only way they can get more is if they break one.

According to Lisa, there have also been multiple reports of the facility turning off the heat to combat the spread of the virus, leaving at least some prisoners dealing with winter temperatures with only blankets. The impact of the virus on prison staffing has also created staffing shortages, Lisa reported. In some circumstances, some inmates report the food portions and nutrition have been diminished. In place of formerly well-balanced meals, the inmate population has on occasion had to eat frozen burritos or bologna, she said.

"It is terrible that the staff is getting sick too, but this is not a good time to have reduced nutrition," Lisa said. "I want them all (inmates and staff) to stay healthy to run a healthy facility. They should be doing what we are all supposed to be doing out here to fight this virus."

According to UDC officials, both facilities are on a modified lockdown; prisoners are only allowed outside of their cells for exercise or telephone contact, which is on a reduced basis.

"We truly appreciate the continued patience of family members while we work through this situation," the UDC posted on a COVID update on the [corrections.utah.gov](https://www.corrections.utah.gov) website.

On the heels of the COVID surge in Utah prisons, UDC executive director Mike Haddon recently resigned. He is transferring to a job as executive director of the Utah Boards of Pardons and Parole.

So far, nine inmates have died of COVID while in UDC custody at the prison in Draper. The UDC also says 168 employees at the two facilities combined had tested positive for COVID as of last week.