

# Utah prison inmates to receive COVID-19 vaccine in 'Phase 2' of rollout

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FOX13

By: [Diego Romo](#)

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DRAPER, Utah — Utah's inmate population has some of the highest risk for contracting COVID-19. According to the latest [data](#) from the Department of Corrections, there are 1,193 active cases of COVID-19 in prisons. A vaccine would help to alleviate some of the challenges in controlling the spread of the virus inside prisons, and the Utah Department of Health plans to give inmates a vaccine in the coming months.



Dr. Michelle Hofmann, the program manager healthcare associated infections program with the Utah Department of Health, said outbreaks in prisons are due in large part to how inmates are housed. "It's the safe distance piece that becomes really challenging in any congregate setting," Dr. Hofmann said.

Wendy Parmley, director of medical and mental health issues for the [Utah Prisoner Advocate Network](#), agreed and said living quarters for inmates can be very tight.

"A lot of the people housed in the prison are in dorm settings," Parmley said. "There are many people housed in a dorm, and those bunks are two-to-three feet apart."

According to Parmley, upwards of 50 people can be housed in a single dormitory unit.

Despite efforts to keep inmates safe, the lack of social distancing has created major problems in the prisons.

"Regardless of what we're doing with personal protective equipment, sanitizing everything, it's still a very high-risk situation because of that inability to maintain the physical distance easily," Dr. Hofmann added.

In a statement sent to FOX 13, the Utah Department of Health said:

"We have vaccinations for corrections populations planned in our Phase 2 response, but the exact timing will be influenced by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommendation and the review by the Strategic Vaccination Coalition."

The "Phase 2" rollout would happen sometime in February or March, alongside long-term care facility staff and residents, according to UDOH's [vaccine distribution plan](#).

"To be able to get that population vaccinated as quickly as possible," Parmley said, "I think will be really important in protecting life."

Cathy Linford, whose son Calvin Hansen is an inmate at the Draper prison, is hopeful a vaccine will help keep him safe.

"That would be wonderful," Linford said. "I would really hope for that to happen."

But Hansen has his doubts about the vaccine.

"I have no faith in the medical system here," Hansen said, referring to the medical facilities at the Draper prison. "I don't know if they'd even give us the actual vaccine."

Hansen spoke to FOX 13 over the phone while his mom was being interviewed for this story.

Sara Wolovick, an attorney with ACLU Utah said this distrust is widespread, and comes from "a lack of adequate medical care."

"Their concerns are not frivolous," Wolovick said. "People are really frightened. A really consistent theme, both in calls to me and in the letters we get from incarcerated people, is the complete lack of social distancing."

Linford says most people brush her son's concerns aside.

"Most people are like, 'He's in prison — he deserves it. So what?' and I'm like, 'Dude, that is my son in there,'" Linford said passionately. "That is my child."

"I feel like they are treating us like lab rats," Hansen added. "I just feel like they haven't handled anything quite properly. I've had so many negative experiences with the medical system here, and I don't even know if I want to take the vaccine from the prison."

In talking with her son while he's been incarcerated, Linford gets the impression that they do not give him or other inmates the care they need.

"I'm really scared for him," Linford added. "They're treated so much less than."

Despite his concerns, Hansen says the vaccine could be beneficial to him in the future.

"I want to go to college. I want to work on cars," Hansen said. "I want to live my life, and the vaccine can help me do that."

Wolovick said getting inmates vaccinated will benefit the whole community.

"It would do enormous good for lessening the burden on our public health resources," she said. "It's really dangerous when you have a huge outbreak in a community that maybe doesn't have the resources to handle hundreds of cases."

Wolovick was referring to the Central Utah Correctional Facility in Gunnison, a city with a population just over 3,500.

"[A vaccine] would be really helpful from a public health perspective, from a humanitarian perspective, also from a racial and social justice perspective," Wolovick said. "People who are incarcerated are disproportionately indigent, and are disproportionately people of color."

Parmley agrees with the moral aspect of ensuring inmates have timely access to vaccinations.

"We are only as good as we treat the very least in our society," Parmley added. "These are dads, and sons, and brothers, and mothers and daughters."

"When we put someone in a cage, we have a constitutional duty, and also a moral duty to take care of them," Wolovick said. "We've deprived them of the ability to care for themselves."

Dr. Hofmann said it's a matter of protecting all lives in our community.

"We should absolutely be caring and protecting people from COVID-19," she said. "Regardless of the circumstances that they're in."

FOX 13 reached out to the Utah Department of Corrections for comment. A spokesperson acknowledged that dormitory style living creates challenges for controlling the spread of the virus, but

declined to issue an official statement. Instead, they referred FOX 13 to their website, where they have been posting regular **COVID-19 updates**.

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