

# Speed of COVID-19 spread shown at Washington County jail where 92 inmates were infected

**Terell Wilkins**

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<https://www.thespectrum.com/picture-gallery/news/2020/07/11/community-members-gather-better-purgatory-covid-response/5419446002/>

Prisons and jails have seen some of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 in the U.S., and Washington County's Purgatory Correctional Facility saw one of the nation's fastest outbreaks in recent weeks when nearly a third of all inmates tested positive.

At the peak of the outbreak, there were 96 inmate cases.

Officials at the jail say they had a thorough plan in place, attributing the rapid spread to many inmates being asymptomatic and tough to diagnose before they spread it to others.

Friends and family of the inmates haven't been convinced.

A large crowd gathered to share them during a vigil at the facility on July 3 where inmates' family members spoke about how they feel the jail has not done enough to protect those on the inside from the virus. Then, on Friday, another group gathered in front of the Washington County Attorney's office in protest of conditions at the jail.

Facility's future



The number of inmates at the facility who are positive has dropped significantly from numbers in the 90s last week to now fewer than 50 active cases.

"Right now we have 42 active cases and there are 54 either recovered or in the recovery stage," Schultz said on Wednesday. "Technically by CDC standards, they've recovered but by our standards, they're still quarantined but in recovery quarantine."

After cases flared up beginning June 20 and became one of the hotspots for COVID-19 in the state, the trend seems to be heading downward as inmates recover from the virus.

Statewide, Felsted said that inmates have done their part in combating the virus by working with all of the changing rules that COVID-19 has brought.

"Any time we have a case within a facility, our staff has been incredibly amazing with all of the changes over the last three months," Felsted said. "I would also say that incarcerated individuals have done an amazing job as well at trying to incorporate the guidelines for the CDC and local health officials, as well as guidelines for the Governor's Office too."



**Washington County residents gather at the office of County Attorney Eric Clarke to encourage better COVID-19 measures for inmates at Purgatory Correctional Facility Friday, July 10, 2020. (Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)**

Though conditions may not be ideal in the era of COVID-19, there are plans in place to prevent inmates from getting the virus and if they do, processes to help them recover.

"We've tried to be very clear in communication of how they can keep themselves safe and providing them with cleaning supplies and things like that," Felsted said. "So that we can try and prevent as much as we possibly can."

Outbreak timeline



**Purgatory Correctional Facility in Hurricane Friday, June 26, 2020.** *(Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)*

Back in March and before a single inmate tested positive, officials at the facility formed a COVID-19 response team to monitor the virus weekly, according to Chief Deputy Jake Schultz.

"We've had a pandemic response committee that's been meeting weekly since March," he said. "We just look at where we're at as far as the facility, any symptoms, any cases and so the health department has been sitting in on those meetings the past two or three weeks."

Schultz says the committee is comprised of the nursing manager, medical unit coordinator, medical director and lieutenants for booking, housing and support services at the jail.

The group met weekly and worked diligently to isolate the first inmate who contracted the virus on May 8. Schultz says that over a month went by before the facility had a second inmate test positive on June 20 and the virus began to spread.

While Schultz said there is still no way to know how the virus made its way into the facility and to the inmates, the intake unit — the area of the main building where people come into the jail — is identified as the most likely option.

"We have no idea where it started. It's too hard to tell," Schultz said. "But based on where some of the larger groups of inmates tested positive, we identified it in our intake unit."

After the June 20 case was announced, the numbers of inmates testing positive for COVID-19 grew over the next week and into July when the facility saw its 96th positive case.



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**Community members gather at Purgatory Correctional Facility to stand in solidarity with inmates infected with COVID-19 Friday, July 3, 2020.** *(Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)*

Despite the earlier planning and the recommendations of the committee formed to handle the coronavirus, the virus still made its way in and infected inmates. Schultz said the lack of obvious symptoms made it difficult to assess the spread.

"Our high was 96 and easily 75 to 80 of them never would have known they had it if we hadn't tested them," Schultz said. "Even the ones who have showed symptoms, they've been mild symptoms."

Only one inmate has been taken to the hospital due to COVID-19. That inmate was deemed high-risk for larger complications due to the virus, Schultz said. The inmate was evaluated but was not hospitalized after tests came back clean.

"We had a pandemic response plan and we've simply been executing it. This wasn't something that we weren't prepared for," Schultz said. "We've been preparing for this for months and then when it happened we moved onto that phase of the plan."

Safety first





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**Purgatory Correctional Facility in Hurricane Friday, June 26, 2020.** (Photo: Chris Caldwell / *The Spectrum & Daily News*)

Family and friends of the inmates painted a different picture during their recent vigil event when they talked about how they felt their loved ones were being treated.

They gave emotional testimonies describing how daily medications were given infrequently, how inmates were not given any masks and how sick inmates were being forced to cohabitate with healthy cellmates.

"They basically told him 'you cannot protect yourself' and now he's infected," said Stephanie Root, whose 25-year-old son Evan was incarcerated at the time. "He's not sick and he does have some very mild symptoms but that doesn't mean it couldn't change tomorrow."

Schultz said at the time that while he understood the concerns of the families, some were misinformed about what safety measures have been implemented.

"People are saying that inmates are not seeing medical, that's not true," Schultz said. "Medical is down there multiple times a day doing oxygen checks, doing temperature checks and treating symptoms as they're reported."



86 Photos

Community members stand with Purgatory inmates who face COVID-19





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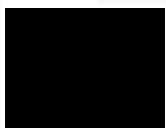
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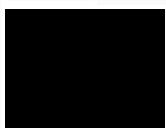
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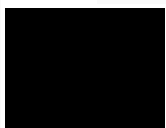
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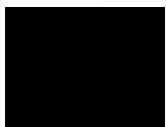
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#### Next Slide

Due to the increase in cases the past few weeks, the correctional facility has included the Southwest Utah Public Health Department in its weekly COVID-19 meetings to help respond to the outbreak with information and expertise provided by health professionals.

Inmates who have tested positive for COVID-19 are moved to a different housing block where they can quarantine for two weeks.

Once the two weeks has passed, the inmate is then moved to a recovery block where to stay for an additional two weeks until a negative test is recorded.

"Once they've done their quarantine time, they move into a recovery unit and technically the virus isn't active anymore," Schultz said. "If it were you and I, we would be going back to work right at this point, but we're putting them in a recovery block for another two weeks until they provide us with another negative test."

Schultz said that when positive cases began to show up is when staff started wearing masks and gloves regularly around the facility.



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**Washington County residents gather at the office of County Attorney Eric Clarke to encourage better COVID-19 measures for inmates at Purgatory Correctional Facility Friday, July 10, 2020. (Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)**

"Once we started dealing with positive cases, they started wearing masks and gloves any time they were outside of their control units," Schultz said.

The correctional facility gets its regulations and rules for staff safety mainly from CDC instructions. Kaitlin Felsted, communications director for the Utah Department of Corrections, said that staff at prisons and jails statewide are following CDC guidelines on "what level of PPE to wear in what areas and how to keep yourself safe within a correctional environment but also out in the community as well".

*Follow reporter Terell Wilkins on Twitter, @terelljwilkins, call him at 252-367-8463 or email him at [twilkins@thespectrum.com](mailto:twilkins@thespectrum.com).*