

ACLU raps health department for lack of COVID-19 inmate vaccinations at Weber County Jail

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OGDEN — The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah on Thursday criticized the Weber-Morgan Health Department over delays in providing COVID-19 vaccinations for inmates at the Weber County Jail.

In a prepared statement, the ACLU blamed the health department for not providing vaccine to the jail and for not responding to the group's questions about the matter.

After holdups in obtaining vaccine from the health department, the Weber County Sheriff's Office set up vaccination clinics this week from a local pharmacy provider, the sheriff's corrections spokesperson, Lt. Joshua Marigoni, said later Thursday.

The first two of four clinics were held Tuesday and Thursday, with 351 inmates being offered vaccinations over the two days and 161 accepting and receiving the shots. Two more clinics will be conducted next week to cover the remainder of the jail population of about 640, Marigoni said.

He said the jail initially worked with the health department to obtain vaccinations, but he understood that supply chain problems with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine derailed plans. Jail officials preferred administering the Johnson & Johnson vaccine because it's a one-dose application. "We didn't want to have some get one dose in here and then not get the other when they get out of jail," he said.

"We've been very much wanting to have the vaccine for a while now," Marigoni said. "It's been on the front burner."

But after the delay, the jail and its medical contractor set up the clinics with a local pharmacy provider, he said. "Nothing against the Weber-Morgan Health Department," he said. "As long as the end goal's met."

Asked for comment, the health department issued a statement that said, in part: "The Weber-Morgan Health Department is working with the Weber County Jail and it is our understanding that they have already started vaccinating their population using the jail's standard operating procedures. ... We continue to support their efforts as needed."

The ACLU said it contacted county jails around the state in April, urging a vaccination push behind bars.

Inmates face a disproportionate risk of contracting COVID-19, the ACLU said, adding that prison inmates in Utah have been infected at a rate 4.5 times higher than the general population. That's due to cellblock living and the inability to practice safe social distancing.

COVID outbreaks in jails also add to community spread, the ACLU said. The Weber jail had a major outbreak in summer 2020, with more than 100 COVID-19 cases reported.

The ACLU said it surveyed jail vaccinations around the state. It praised Davis and San Juan counties for administering vaccinations to the bulk of their populations at an early stage. Weber was one of the "serious outliers" that did not have rapid progress, the ACLU said.