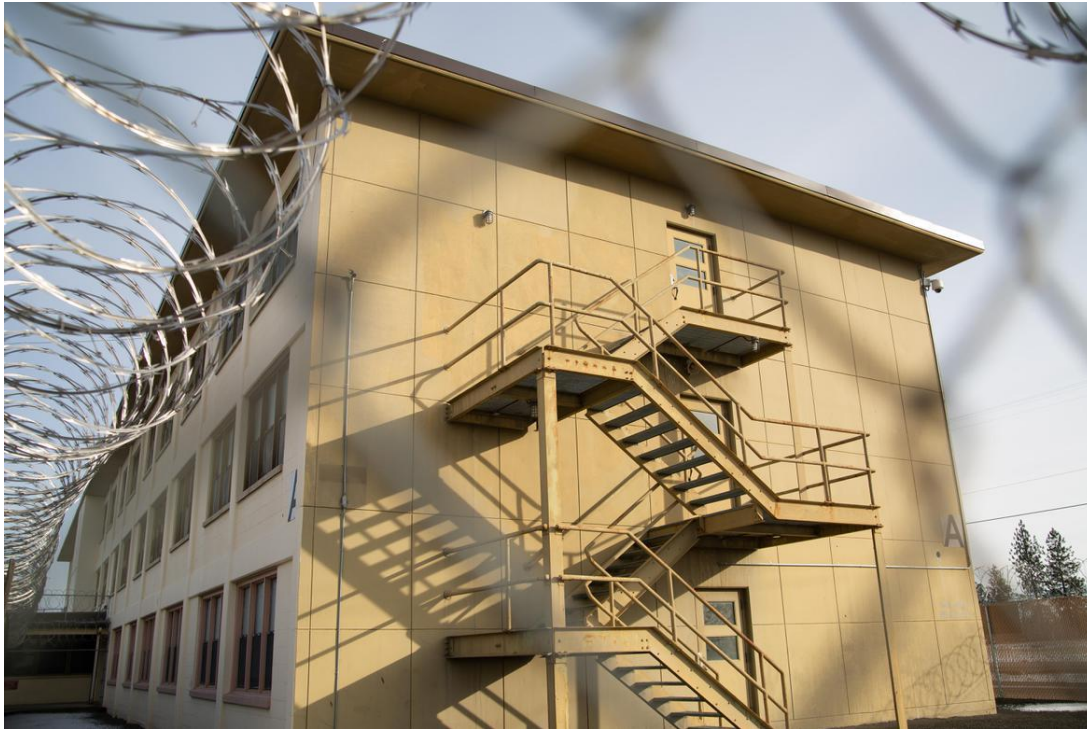


Dozens released from Spokane County custody following Municipal Court emergency order

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A barbed-wire fence surrounds the Geiger Corrections Center in Airway Heights in February 2019. Dozens of people were released from Geiger and the Spokane County Jail on Monday following an emergency order from Spokane Municipal Court that aims to alleviate crowding and prevent the spread of the new coronavirus among inmates. (Libby Kamrowski / The Spokesman-Review)

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Dozens of people were released from the Spokane County Jail and the Geiger Corrections Center on Monday following an emergency order from Spokane Municipal Court that aims to alleviate crowding and prevent the spread of the new coronavirus among inmates.

Presiding Judge Matthew Antush signed the order after officials from Spokane County Detention Services urged local judges, police and prosecutors to “consider all mechanisms” for reducing the jail population during the pandemic.

Antush cited “the significant number of projected cases of COVID-19 likely to occur in the city of Spokane and the severity of risk posed to the public, court personnel and litigants.”

The order suspended many Municipal Court operations and resulted in the release of some prisoners who were awaiting trial and some who were serving sentences for misdemeanor crimes.

County spokesman Jared Webley said 48 people jailed for “low-level” offenses were released as a result of the order on Monday.

Municipal Court Administrator Howard Delaney said the city prosecutor’s office reviewed a list of people jailed on city charges and decided who should be released in collaboration with judges.

Prosecutors and judges determined those who were released posed “no material risk to the community,” Delaney said.

“The way you’ve got to look at it is: Is committing a misdemeanor worth getting a sentence of the COVID virus?” Delaney said.

Municipal Court Judge Tracy Staab said officials prioritized “nuisance” cases for release, citing trespassing charges as an example. Cases involving domestic violence and driving under the influence are taken more seriously, she said.

Staab said those who were serving sentences were essentially furloughed and will be expected to complete their jail stays when concerns about COVID-19 transmission subside.

The 48 people who were released represent a small but significant percentage of Spokane County’s jail population, which has hovered between 900 and 1,000 in recent years. Calls to reduce the jail population have been amplified recently amid concerns that correctional facilities will become hot spots for coronavirus transmission.

“People in jail are unable to distance themselves from others and take other necessary preventative measures,” the nonprofit Bail Project said in [a recent letter to city and county leaders](#). “The risk of spreading infection is especially severe in light of the Spokane County Jail’s chronic overcrowding. This threatens everyone incarcerated in a jail, along with their loved ones, jail staff and the state’s public health infrastructure at large.”

[In a memo to employees on Monday](#), Mike Sparber, the director of Spokane County Detention Services, announced that friends and relatives would be barred from visiting inmates. Educational and therapeutic programs also are suspended, as is the inmate work crew.

“We are currently evaluating the jail population in an effort to reduce capacity and minimize risk,” Sparber said.

Spokane Municipal Court and Spokane County District Court primarily handle civil infractions, misdemeanors and gross misdemeanors, while Spokane County Superior Court handles most felony cases.

The Washington Supreme Court on March 4 granted lower courts across the state extraordinary powers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The high court’s order states: “The presiding judges of the Washington courts are authorized to adopt, modify and suspend court rules and orders, and to take further actions concerning court operations, as warranted to address the current health emergency.”

The three courts in Spokane each signed emergency orders on Monday, postponing trials and requiring that many hearings take place by phone or video conferencing. But only Municipal Court ordered that certain people be released from jail.

It wasn’t immediately clear if District Court or Superior Court defendants would be released due to the pandemic. Spokane County Prosecutor Larry Haskell didn’t respond to messages seeking comment Tuesday evening.