

# Thurston inmates voice COVID-19 fears, efforts underway to thin crowded population

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Advocates across Washington have voiced urgent concern for prison and jail populations in light of the COVID-19 public health crisis. Inmates live in close quarters that make social distancing difficult.

[Lawsuits](#) and [letters](#) warn that the new coronavirus, which causes COVID-19 respiratory disease, would spread quickly through the facilities and contribute to overwhelming the health care system.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers resources on its website specifically aimed at corrections facilities, noting the [heightened risk](#) for the new virus to spread there once it's introduced.

Locally, inmates at the Thurston County jail feel the risk firsthand. The Olympian spoke to three inmates at the jail, all of whom say they live in the same dormitory and are scared of what's to come.

The majority of Thurston's jail population is made up of minimum- and medium-security inmates who jail officials have deemed safe to live in open-concept dormitories that can hold up to 68 people. Maximum-custody and special-needs inmates are typically housed in cells.

"We've been in confinement in one room, about 29 of us," Derrick Thompson told The Olympian in a phone interview. "We can't practice social distancing here — it's impossible to do that in here."

Another inmate, Michael Mange, said he had been coughing all night, and that when he finally got medical attention, he was simply given Tylenol.

"Nobody here deserves to be sentenced to death, you know what I mean?" Mange told The Olympian. "We've got old people in here."

When The Olympian asked Chief Deputy of Corrections Todd Thoma about the claim that Corrections staff weren't taking inmates' concerns seriously, he doubted its veracity. He said officers know they need to respond seriously to inmates and are concerned for their own health, too.

“The inmates are obviously concerned, and I don’t blame them,” Thoma said. “At the same time, the staff working here have the same concerns as well.”

Sheriff John Snaza echoed a similar sentiment: “Their concerns are our concerns,” he said. “Obviously, we want to ensure that they are safe.”

[‘A cruise ship, where new people get on it every day’](#)

County jails hold inmates who are awaiting trial or who have been sentenced to one year or less of confinement. But stays can stretch beyond a year when trials are pushed out or sentences are served consecutively, Thoma told The Olympian.

Officials have celebrated the lockup’s dorms in the past — officers directly supervise; violence, vandalism, and stress levels for inmates have gone down.

But now, the open rooms where a constantly changing population of inmates eat and sleep in close proximity present a question without a solid answer: How do you keep that population healthy during a global pandemic?

Earlier this week, Thoma said the four jail dorms were housing between 19 and 50 inmates each.

But Thurston County’s justice system officials say they are prioritizing lowering those numbers and keeping them low.

“The less we have in custody, the more manageable things will be in the event we do have an outbreak or situation associated with this,” Thoma told The Olympian Wednesday.

To that end, Thurston County Sheriff John Snaza says his office has pulled back on confirming arrest warrants.

A shuttle program that typically transports prisoners with warrants from one jail to another isn’t running due to COVID-19, he said. So if someone is arrested in Spokane who has a Thurston County warrant, for example, Snaza’s office would need to send a deputy to Spokane.

If an offense is more serious or violent, Snaza said, a deputy will still take that person into custody.

“I’m a law-and-justice guy, and for me to have to do this is really difficult,” Snaza said in a phone interview.

Thurston County Prosecuting Attorney Jon Tunheim says his office is focused on violent cases, crimes against people, and “high-loss property cases” — he mentioned a spree of thefts as a hypothetical example. There could be some exceptions, but Tunheim said

his office is working to get lower-priority cases into diversion programs or delayed for now.

In response to an emergency order the state Supreme Court issued last week, a lot has [recently changed](#) at Thurston County Superior Court: Hours are limited, trials and many court appearances are suspended. Remaining appearances are done via phone or video.

“I am incredibly impressed with my organization and, frankly, the whole system,” Tunheim said. “...We’ve really transformed the whole system in a week.”

New directives also have placed a priority on getting low-risk inmates already in the system out of custody.

Thurston County Public Defense has been working with Corrections and the Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, Director of Thurston County Public Defense Patrick O’Connor told The Olympian.

Corrections gives O’Connor’s office a list of inmates, why they’re in jail, and release dates for those who’ve been sentenced. His office then approaches the Prosecutor’s Office to see if they can agree on releasing an individual because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

If both sides agree, they submit an order to a judge. If they don’t, they’ll argue in front of the judge, who then makes a ruling, O’Connor said.

On Wednesday, for example, O’Connor estimated a judge granted release for about 10 people. Others have been released via agreed order.

“Most of the agreed orders and motions we’re making for a lot of those cases — hopefully we’ll start to see a reduction in the dorms, because they’re already classified as not high-violent individuals, if that’s where they’re living,” O’Connor said.

O’Connor likened the dorms to “a cruise ship, where new people get on it every day.”

Prosecutor Tunheim warned against painting inmates in broad strokes based on the jail’s low- and medium-custody designations, however, saying that determination is based on safety within the jail setting, not considering risk to public safety.

Thoma said he’d seen about a 20% decrease in the jail population over the past month — from 354 inmates in the system to 285.

“Kudos to the courts, to the Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, and to Public Defense and Pretrial Services for their efforts reducing our population,” Thoma said.

## Mitigation inside the jail

According to an internal document shared with The Olympian, county Corrections has taken several actions aimed at keeping COVID-19 out of the facility.

One of the many changes: The jail has canceled its volunteer programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and jail ministries, to limit exposure, which Corrections Chief Thoma said was a difficult decision.

“Basically, all inmate programs have been suspended because we had providers coming in from the outside for these programs,” Thoma told The Olympian. “A lot would be facilitated throughout the facility, and inmates were coming from other dorms into a common space.”

Thoma said the jail has set aside 14 cells so inmates who have just been booked can be observed for 48 to 72 hours before entering the general population. The jail also has four cells with “negative air flow,” designed with potential tuberculosis patients in mind, that Thoma said will be used for isolation if inmates have symptoms.

Efforts to thin out the jail population made it possible to set aside those cells, Thoma said.

The jail contracts with a company called Healthcare Delivery Systems that operates an on-site medical clinic for 18 hours per day, Thoma said, with a provider on-call the other six hours.

It had five COVID-19 test kits as of this week, according to both Thoma and Sheriff John Snaza.

Snaza told The Olympian an inmate had been tested for COVID-19 and was isolated while awaiting results Tuesday. But Thoma checked with the medical contractor and said that no inmates had been tested.

One person with flu-like symptoms was cleared medically and bailed out of jail at about the same time, Thoma said. Another person with flu-like symptoms was isolated then cleared by medical staff. A third was being screened for flu-like symptoms on Wednesday.

“Our medical is doing the same assessments that I’m sure any practitioner would do in the community,” such as ruling out the flu and other illnesses, Thoma said.

He said the jail, as of this week, had an adequate supply of personal protective equipment, sanitizers, and cleansers. But that can change fast.

“What we’re trying to do, like anybody else, is mitigate any possibility of there being an outbreak,” Thoma said. “We’ve limited the movements, we’re educating the inmates

again about distancing and their personal hygiene, washing their hands. We're doing all those things, but the reality is we are in a confined space."

### What if there's an outbreak?

If COVID-19 does make its way into a dorm — through a new inmate who starts displaying symptoms after their 72-hour isolation period is over, for example — Thoma said the jail is developing its response on a day-to-day basis.

Right now, the focus is on mitigation.

"There's no silver bullet," Thoma said. If it happens, he says, the jail will continue to mitigate, isolate, and get a medical response. "We've cleared out areas. The best thing we can do is evaluate the response and the need."

Advocates say Thurston should be doing more to prevent an outbreak in the first place.

Jaime Hawk, legal strategy director for the ACLU of Washington's Smart Justice campaign, is leading the organization's response to COVID-19 as it impacts people in jails and prisons.

Hawk said she's tracking what's happening in Thurston and called the jail-population reduction so far "a start."

"Thurston County must get that jail population down further, so there's not people in a dorm, crowded together, bunked together in confined spaces. Our worst fear is one person gets it and it's just going to spread like wildfire," she said.

Another area of concern: Its work release program. It's been altered, according to internal documents, but Thoma says inmates who still have jobs leave for work and come back to stay in the dorm overnight.

On Wednesday, 28 men and six women were assigned to work release.

"Shut it down," Hawk said, in reference to the program. "What are we doing? That does not make a lot of sense under these circumstances."

King County Executive Dow Constantine signed an executive order Tuesday [suspending its work release program](#) and taking several other specific actions.

Thoma said shutting down the program has been discussed and isn't "completely off the table." His concerns: The need to re-acclimate inmates and keep people connected to the community, that inmates have the ability to work and provide for their families, and that the people still with jobs are supporting industries the state has deemed essential, like food service.

“Am I right? I don’t know,” Thoma said. “But we weighed the factors and it was important to us to allow people who could work to continue to work. This whole thing is fluid.”

King County also has transferred inmates who are at high risk for severe complications from COVID-19 — older than 60 or with underlying health conditions — to a separate housing unit where social distancing is more achievable.

As of Wednesday, Thurston County Corrections officials said no particular precautions had been taken for inmates at high risk for the disease.

Thoma said jail managers across the state are holding weekly conference calls to share ideas and information from doctors and experts.

“I believe we’re prepared, but the reality is a jail is a jail,” Thoma said. “It is very difficult to necessarily isolate everybody. It’s very difficult for social distancing, even though we’re reminding the inmates. They’re in close quarters, it’s a very unique situation.”

Read more here:

<https://www.theolympian.com/news/coronavirus/article241530651.html#storylink=cpy>