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The Illogic of Stanley's Response to COVID-19

A little common sense would go a long way when it comes to reducing the risk of transmitting COVID-19 within Stanley prison. So would applying the principle of "shelter in place."

Prison officials are trying to apply free-world guidelines in the prison environment but are doing so without regard to common sense. First and foremost, DOC officials refuse to stop inter-prison transfers. They suspended transfers from contract facilities (county jails who house the overflow of state prisoners) but they are still transferring prisoners between prisons. That means if the infection takes hold in one prison and one infected prisoner is transferred to another prison, it will spread the infection immediately and all the precautions previously taken will have been a waste of time. Last week, a prisoner was transferred into Stanley from Waupun prison who had been exposed to the Waupun doctor (the doctor tested positive for COVID-19). The transfer bus holds 40 prisoners and the bus stopped at 2 other prisons before stopping at Stanley. If the exposed prisoner has COVID-19 then he in turn exposed the other prisoners riding on the bus to COVID-19 and they entered at least 3 different prisons. That's how the entire prison system will become infected.

In Stanley, there are 5 housing units. Each housing unit has 3 wings. Each wing has 50 cells. When Stanley was built, it was designed as single cells. The rated capacity was 750. When the DOC bought the prison from Dominion Group, the first thing they did was to add another bunk to every cell and redefined the prison's capacity as 1500. In other words, we are housing at over 200% capacity (there are over 1500 prisoners housed in a prison built for 750 prisoners). We are packed in like sardines. Free world guidelines recommend keeping 6 feet between people which is impossible in the housing units. All tables in the dayroom are 4 seats, welded in place and only about 2 feet apart. When they feed us, we line up with only inches between us. There's no way we can create a personal safe zone.

However, in spite of this, the prison is keeping its chapel, library, school and hobby open (all contained in the same building). They are enforcing the 6 foot safe area policy in this building while allowing prisoners from all 5 units to mingle in these areas. None of these areas are critical. They could easily be closed for the duration rather than risk one infected prisoner from a unit infecting prisoners from other units. With the extreme crowding in the units, if one prisoner is infected every prisoner on that unit will be exposed. The hallways are of standard width - about 8 feet wide. We all walk down the hallways together and must all sign at the officer's station (using the same pen attached to the clip board). It is only after this close contact and

cross-contamination occurs that we go to our destinations and practice the 6 foot safety zone. The policy makes no sense. But wait, it gets more illogical.

The gym and outside walking/jogging track (rec) is scheduled by unit so each unit attends separately. A new policy came out over the weekend which limits rec to one half of each wing of each unit at one time. In other words, we are stuffed into our housing unit wings elbow to elbow but when it comes to going outside or to the gym, only half of the wing can go at one time. Since we are in constant close contact all day long, what sense does it make to restrict our opportunity to exercise? Our rec access went from 3 outside rec periods and one inside gym period (each 50 minutes long) to one 20 minute period per day.

Stopping us from going to rec together accomplishes nothing but making us spend more time in the housing unit in close proximity to each other. At the same time, permitting prisoners from every housing unit to go to one building and mingle for non-essential reasons will guarantee that if one unit gets infected, they will all get infected. It makes no sense. Prison officials are following free world guidelines which are inappropriate for the prison environment.

Each unit must be isolated from all the other units as the only way to prevent a prison-wide outbreak. In my opinion, it appears that prison officials are implementing policies which will result in a worst case scenario occurring.

It's not a question of asking if COVID-19 will come to Stanley, but when it will come and how bad it will be.