

A JAIL OF TWO TIMELINES

BY CHARLIE DEITCH - PITTSBURGH CURRENT EDITOR
CHARLIE@PITTSBURGHCURRENT.COM

At the beginning of March, Allegheny County officials and the rest of the state started preparing for the onslaught of the coronavirus. By the middle of the month, a coalition of advocates, citizens and elected officials demanded that as many inmates as possible be removed from the county jail to mitigate a major outbreak once the COVID-19 Virus got inside. While there is still some discussions on whether everyone that could be released was released, a bigger problem was occurring inside the jail's walls.

Very early in this crisis, the media and members of the community were asking for more details on what was being done at the jail to stop the spread of the virus among inmates, employees, contractors, visitors, etc. Information was sparse. Even two prominent members of the County Jail's Oversight Board, County Controller Chelsa Wagner and Allegheny County Councilor Bethany Hallam couldn't get updates and regular information.

In the past several weeks, jail employees and others have reached out to the Pittsburgh Current to tell stories of serious failure by the jail's management to adequately prepare for and mitigate the arrival of the virus at the Jail. The following timeline has been compiled from public documents, statements, interviews with employees and internal emails and documents obtained by the Current.

THE OUTSIDE STORY

THE INSIDE STORY



March 10: A corrections officer at the jail sends an email to administrators requesting that a spray bottle of bleach and alcohol-based hand sanitizer to the cart that carries cleaning chemicals. There is no response from jail officials regarding the employee's request.

March 11: No Screening policies are enacted at the county jail. A second corrections officer emails Warden Orlando Harper asking for bleach or bleach wipes for certain areas of the jail, including the visitation room. If not provided, the officer asks if employees can bring their own. Harper responds back that "the request is denied." A third Corrections officer alerts the staff and administration that alerts from the health department offering guidance on proper virus mitigation procedures cannot be opened. The employee writes, "how can we keep updated about our health and safety if we can't open the links." No response is given.



March 2: County departments are given printable posters about how to battle the spread of COVID-19, including instructions to "clean and disinfect" frequently touched objects.

March 4: Dr. Debra Bogen is named the new director of the Allegheny County Health Department.

March 6: The state of Pennsylvania announces its first positive COVID-19 cases.

March 10: A health Department press release issues guidance on workplace safety, saying sick employees should stay home and that there needed to be routine cleaning of frequently touched surfaces and that employees should have access to disposable wipes to do so.

March 12: The State DOC cancels all visits at state-run facilities and enhanced screening measures are adopted for all who enter the jail. Anyone with a temp over 100.4 will not be admitted.



March 11: COVID-19 Cases in the state increase 25 percent in 24 hours. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections announces that there will be increased screenings of visitors and employees at the facility.

March 13: A press release from Allegheny County says large gatherings should be avoided and stresses continued washing of hands and cleaning of surfaces. President Trump declares a national emergency in response to the virus.

March 14: Allegheny County announces its first two positive cases of COVID-19. Mitigation procedures are reiterated and workers are urged to stay home if they are sick. It is announced that personal visits at the county jail will be stopped for two weeks. Attorneys will still be able to visit clients.

March 16: OSHA releases guidance on protecting employees from COVID-19. They include the following: identify and isolate suspected cases of COVID-19. Use control measures like Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) like masks, move "potentially infectious individuals" away! Allegheny County calls for the closure of all non-essential businesses.

March 17: A day after advocates and elected officials ask that the county inmate population be reduced, an update on jail operations is given by the county. "Confined areas at the Allegheny County Jail undoubtedly present challenges, but through experience and defined policies, jail staff is adept at taking precautions to mitigate and eliminate the spread of illness or disease. The jail faces hurdles each year in dealing with influenza and other infectious illnesses between inmates and staff, and, through infection control procedures, the facility has been able to curb these conditions." The release says additional actions have been taken including increased availability of cleaning agents, reducing access to the jail, new intake procedures of new inmates and screening for new inmates at point of entry and incoming jail staff.

March 22: County and state health departments continue to tell citizens not to go to work if you are sick. Also, Warden Harper sends out an email saying that he consulted with the county health department regarding interactions between healthcare professionals and inmates during the intake process or medical care. "Healthcare professionals aren't required to don an approved mask unless the inmate's condition would warrant that protective measure." Harper says the jail has "taken steps to combat the arrival of COVID-19 in our facility." That includes the removal of 203 inmates from the facility.

March 20: Warden Orlando Harper emails jail staff telling them that inmates will now be limited to one roll of toilet paper per week.

March 23: The state DOC further changes its intake policies and indicates it has been in contact with local and county jail facilities regarding best practices for fighting COVID-19. For example, whole state facilities began screening anyone entering state facilities on March 12, no such screenings, except for new inmates, has begun at the ACJ. An email containing CDC guidelines entitled "Interim Guidance on Management of Coronavirus ... in Correctional and Detention Facilities." On the list: provide adequate inmate soap, offer alcohol-based hand sanitizers, recommends face masks, including N95 where applicable, which should be fit tested, if space allows, reassign bunks

March 27: Allegheny County announces that COVID-19 has made its way into the jail through an employee who had no direct contact with staff. Warden also sends an internal email.

March 29: A county jail supervisor emails officers and orders them to stop using internal email to complain about weak bleach solutions.

March 30: The State DOC says that "Quarantining the entire system is in the best interest of our employees and our inmates." Inmates remain and are fed in their cell and given time out of cells for phone calls and law-library visits. There will also be in-cell programming. According to a release: "All inmate movement will be controlled to conform to social distancing recommendations." A day later, federal prisons will do the same for its nearly 150,000 inmate population.

April 3&4: Warden Harper releases social-distancing policies. "In following the suggestions of the ACHD and CDC, management at the Allegheny County Jail is recommending all employees, contractors and inmates practice social/physical distancing across the facility until further notice. By practicing social/physical distancing, we reduce the number of contacts we have each day. It can have a big impact on the ability of COVID-19 to spread. By limiting the spread of the virus, we can protect those around us. Across the entire facility, the recommendation is to distance yourself six feet from each colleague or inmate you come in contact with." On April 4, nearly two weeks after employees are sent the CDC guidelines, N-95 masks are handed out to any employee or inmate who wants them. However, the masks are not required.

April 5-Present: On April 7, the Current reports that because hundreds of inmates have been released, there are 224 empty cells at the jail. However, instead of spreading out inmates, they are packed closer together. On April 8, a federal class-action lawsuit is filed against the ACJ by three inmates with high-susceptibility to COVID-19. That same day, the county announced that an inmate had contracted COVID-19. A second case was announced April 11 and a third on April 12. As of April 13, the ACJ was still not on quarantine.

ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL - TIMELINE

March 12: Another employee request for bleach wipes in the visitor's area is denied. A corrections officer raises concerns about the jail's intake area writing in an email, "Are the non-alcohol based hand sanitizers effective enough to stop the spread of the coronavirus? ... Inmates have no soap within the cells and little running water to wash their hands after using the restroom. Will the bleach solution be enough to combat any exposure or spreading of the virus?" A senior corrections officer informs employees that a bleach solution is forthcoming.

MARCH 13: Employees are told bleach cleaning solution will be disseminated to take care of "common areas" and not inmate cells. In an email, Warden Harper says, "In our facility, we are receiving recommendations and guidance from the Allegheny County Health Department and other government agencies."

March 14: Despite the county's release, jail employees say the visitation policy is unchanged; no screening of visitors, employees and contractors. This will not change until March 16.

March 17: Employees say no additional operational changes are made, except for the addition of bleach cleaner.

March 18: Seven days after the state announced its new procedures, new intake procedures for the county jail are explained, including screening and a plan for isolation and quarantine of new arrestees. However, employees tell the Current, the arresting officers who come in contact with jail employees are not screened.

March 16: Personal visits are finally halted at the county jail (legal visits continue). However, advanced screenings are still nonexistent, no PPE is provided and there is no guidance on what to do if COVID-19 is suspected. A corrections officer asks specific questions of his union president and receives no answers. Employees complain of no written instructions given on sanitization.

March 19: Two days after the county says new screening procedures have been implemented, employees say no screenings of employees, vendors or contractors is conducted and PPE has not been provided. NOTE: The County Jail WILL NOT start advanced health screenings until March 28, a full 11 days after the county announced it was already happening.

March 22: A corrections officer sends out an email warning that employees should not abuse the jail's leave policy or "it will be bad for all of us."



March 23: Despite the CDC guidelines, employees say they have not received PPE, hand sanitizers are running out and the amount of soap is not increased. Officers say bleach is scarce and when it does arrive, it seems severely watered down.

March 27: Employees say they were bothered by Harper's failure to respond to questions regarding his above email. One employee emails Warden Harper: "I find it bothersome and genuinely concerning that responses to your email regarding a colleague of ours testing positive for COVID-19 have gone unacknowledged. With the fluidity of this pandemic, my fellow co-workers concerns/suggestions should be, at least, acknowledged. We all have families, some with children, others with elderly, and others with high risk individuals. We would all like to be assured that our concerns are truly being addressed and considered."

March 29: Officers are complaining about a weak bleach solution. Also, quarantined inmates are left on the housing unit instead of transferring to medical.

March 28: The day after the employee tests positive, advanced screening finally begins. Despite employee requests, jail administration won't release any information about what inmates or employees have been quarantined. Not only are masks not being handed out in the jail, but they are also forbidden.

April 1: Employees say the ACJ is still not in quarantine, despite the recommendations of the CDC and other detention facilities. There is still PPE made available.

April 3&4: Employees say they find Harper's decision to release the policy odd given other policies that remain in effect. For example, They are not allowed to wear masks into the building. They are screened on the way in and then are packed into an elevator to get to their posts. Once N95 masks are finally given out, inmates aren't given instructions on how to properly wear them and there is no fit testing. Employees who wanted a mask had to sign a waiver that they were receiving the mask, however, no fit testing would be given. Masks are now mandatory.

April 2: As reported in the April 7 edition of the Pittsburgh Current, two corrections officers are hauled in front of administrators because they refused to remove masks that they brought into the facility during a search of cells. One of the employees refuses to return to work without the mask and is suspended. And the other, according to records viewed by the Current, was reminded that they were still within their probationary period and not following orders might not go well. That officer returns to work without a mask despite the fact that she told officials she cares for an elderly relative.