

Jail a virus 'hotspot,' but officials silent on the details

Inmate: More than two dozen in one pod tested positive

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Broome County has been monitoring its jail for at least a week due to an increase of COVID-19 cases, but the extent of the spread is unclear and inmates and others are asking for more transparency from the facility.

On Dec. 4, the health department said the Broome County Sheriff's Correctional Facility was a "hotspot" for the coronavirus, but neither the health department nor Sheriff's Office staff provided details into the cases, including how many positive cases have been linked to the jail, including inmates and employees.

On Dec. 4, the health department said the Broome County Sheriff's Office staff provided details into the cases, including how many positive cases have been linked to the jail, including inmates and employees. It's the second time the jail has been labeled a hotspot, the first coming in April when there was an increase in cases at the Town of Dickinson facility. Broome County Executive Jason Garnar said Dec. 2 a "handful" of staff and inmates had contracted the virus, its first cases since July.

"In congregate care settings, like nursing homes and jails, they're the places where we'll see more cases," said Garnar, who noted that a "couple hundred" people work at the jail.

However, officials haven't said how many people have tested positive or if extra precautions are being taken to slow or stop the spread at the jail.

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Garnar said Sheriff David Harder has "stepped up" infection controls after the jail was deemed a hotspot, but the health department didn't specify what that meant beyond saying a hotspot is "a facility with sustained viral transmission among occupants."

When asked for the number of inmates and staff who have the virus, the health department deferred to the jail, which has not returned requests for comment.

The *Press & Sun-Bulletin* / *pressconnects.com* submitted a Freedom of Information Act request in an attempt to obtain the data.

"We are seeing a lot of cases in state prisons, like Elmira where there were hundreds, that's what I would call an outbreak," Garnar said.

Inmates, family members concerned

Inmate Rajee Almashini, 18, expressed his concerns about the virus in the jail, and said infected persons were in B, E, I and H pods as of Dec. 3.

Dan Radcliffe said his son Lucas Radcliffe is in H pod and has tested positive for the virus.

"No one notified me," Dan Radcliffe said. "Not a call from the jail, not a call from the health department, no one. I have called both places, which seem to be inept and they're putting people's lives in danger. They're playing a risky game."

Lucas Radcliffe called his significant other to notify her of the test results, his father said, and she notified his parents.

"This is unacceptable," Dan Radcliffe said. "It's more than unacceptable, it's the opposite of the oath taken by not only the sheriff but all of the employ-



Broome County Sheriff's Corrections Division's 536-bed direct supervision correctional facility at 155 Lt. Vanwinkle Drive in the Town of Dickinson.

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ees."

He said the last update he'd received, his son said 28 people in his pod had tested positive for the virus.

Andy Pragacz, a SUNY Cortland criminology professor who is involved with Justice and Unity for the Southern Tier, an activism and advocacy organization, said people in the facility now are trapped.

"Courts are stalled, speedy trial laws have loosened, treatment facilities are difficult to access, the state system is not accepting new transfers," Pragacz said. "Now there is a predictable COVID-19 outbreak."

Pragacz said options include releases

for vulnerable people, probation/parole violations, those needing access to treatment, and people finishing up local sentences, but "County officials have chosen lockdowns, which make incarcerated people more vulnerable to abuse, mental and physical health problems, inability to access lawyers and stay in touch with family members."

Since April, the inmate population in the jail has increased from 283 to 372 in November. Of the inmates currently in the facility, 47 people have been sentenced, 22 are awaiting transport to a state facility, 15 are technical parole violators and 29 are federal.

This leaves 258 people in the facility

un-sentenced, awaiting further court action.

Precautions and demands

In April, the jail had its first outbreak of cases and it filed its plan for infection control, which included:

- Posting of CDC and Department of Public Health signage throughout the facility.
- PPE for all employees and mandated masking since April 6.
- Daily briefings delivered electronically to staff.
- Increased locations of hand sanitizer throughout the facility.
- Increased daily cleaning including all housing units and staff areas.
- 14-day quarantine for new arrivals.
- Daily temperature checks of all incarcerated people.
- Staff with contact with someone who tested positive is to follow Broome County Health Department guidelines for self-quarantine.
- Staff have been issued hand sanitizer.

A protest dubbed "Home for the Holidays" is set for noon Saturday at the jail and lists what organizers are calling demands:

- Regularly report on the number of tests and positivity rate for staff and incarcerated people.
- Immediate release for those at risk for COVID-19 including the elderly, disabled and immunocompromised; those serving short sentences or time for technical violations; people needing addiction or mental health treatment.
- Providing tests, personal protective equipment and clean facilities to the people inside.
- Provide housing, food and medical care to those coming home.
- Make phone/video calls free.
- Ensure Corrections Officers wear masks when in the facility and suspend those who refuse.