



Two COVID waves later, cases decrease at county detention center

McKinley County Adult Detention Center in Gallup has experienced two “waves” of coronavirus infections even as it enlists the help of its inmates to do deep cleanings, according to Tony Boyd, warden of the facility.

The waves occurred in April/May of 2020 and in November/December, but Boyd said as of Jan. 25, there are only two asymptomatic cases and no confirmed symptomatic ones. Fourteen inmates are in isolation “as a precaution,” he added, while three are awaiting coronavirus test results. That all comes after one inmate tested positive for the virus and another died — but

only after transferring to another correctional facility while hospitalized, according to Boyd.

“It definitely puts the dangers of the virus in perspective,” he wrote in an email.

Coronavirus cases are down from the first wave, which resulted in 16 inmates and 10 staff members becoming infected, as well as the second, which resulted in 24 inmates and 14 staffers getting infected (including Boyd). There are 82 offenders and 48 staff at the detention center.

Boyd said the facility, which has not had any visitors since March, has undertaken a rigorous prevention plan for COVID-19.

CorrHealth, a Texas-based company, is responsible for offenders’ screenings, including for COVID-19, when they enter the detention center and throughout their stay, according to Victor Hutchinson, company co-founder and president of operations.

Inmates’ coronavirus tests are sent to the lab and they are placed away from one another in separate cells while inmates await results of the test, he wrote in an email. Only a second negative test allows inmates back into the general population, while those with positive results are placed in another unit. If no symptoms are apparent by the eleventh day, those inmates can go back into the general population.

CorrHealth is also responsible for daily temperature checks and inquiries on COVID symptom checks for all inmates, Hutchinson wrote. Twenty-five percent of the inmate population is re-tested weekly.

All offenders are issued a cloth mask when they come into the detention center and are asked to clean their own cells.

Offenders that have caught COVID-19 have been “mostly” asymptomatic, Boyd said. A few had

minor symptoms. Only one had major symptoms.

Cases of coronavirus could have come from inmates already infected when they were arrested or from staff members who had the virus before getting a test or showing symptoms, according to Boyd.

“It could have come from anywhere,” he said.

Asked whether he was worried about a third wave of infections, Boyd pointed to the British variant identified as B.1.1.7, a “more highly transmissible” version of coronavirus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The variant, which originated in the United Kingdom, has taken hold in 12 U.S. states, the agency says.

“I worry about that all the time,” Boyd said. “But we do everything we can to keep it out.”

Boyd believes that 60 percent of inmates at the detention center would choose to get vaccinated if the shots were offered to them, while 40 percent would.

“They have the right to receive it and a lot of them just don’t trust the vaccine because it was rushed so fast,” Boyd said.

That is strikingly similar to a study the Pew Research Center conducted in December, around the time the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines were shipped. The Pew study said 60 percent of Americans would get a vaccine, while about 39 percent said they would not get it.

But it’s not just inmates who are skeptical of the two vaccines — it’s the staff at the detention center, Boyd added.

Inmate advocates, including the American Medical Association, have pushed hard for states to grant early access for offenders to get the vaccines. According to the COVID-19 Prison Project, over 350,000 of those incarcerated have tested positive and more than 2,000 have died, while some 84,000 staffers tested positive and over 100 died.

Steve Allen, director of the N.M. Jail and Prison Project nonprofit, said he agrees with the state's department of health that correctional facilities should be prioritized for vaccinations.

"Although it may not be politically popular to prioritize people who are incarcerated for vaccination, it is a smart way to help protect all New Mexicans," he wrote in an email.

Gallup attorney Barry Klopfer said coronavirus and the law are almost synonymous.

"If you have any volume in clients, you're going to have people that have gotten sick in the jail," Klopfer said.

He believes jails could improve their coronavirus prevention practices — though he did give the local detention center some praise.

"Our jail is learning from this experience to continually improve [its efforts toward] getting a lower COVID-positive rate," Klopfer said. He later added that he had not heard of the detention center's second wave or the jail transfer death.

Klopfer stressed police "can and should be using more discretion" with people who are arrested.

"There are plenty of offenses in which they [the courts] could simply be issuing a summons right now … rather than arresting them [lawbreakers]," he said. "The jail is just too dangerous to presume there's not a high risk of infection. The best way is to respond by using it [the jail system] for only the most violent people that society believes need to be locked up."

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