

Boudicca //

*This essay was originally published in Scalawag and is reprinted here courtesy of Exchange for Change. Several similar first-person accounts of COVID-19 in prison will appear in the forthcoming anthology Hear Us.*

We watched the inexorable spread of COVID-19 on *World News Tonight*. Still, it did not make much of an impression on the inmates at Camp Prisoney Land, nor the Department of Corrections for that matter. In late March, I sat waiting for an appointment and overheard an officer being reprimanded for wearing a mask and gloves at work. You see, regardless of the rising infection rate in Miami, which skyrocketed from a few hundred to well over 20,000 in just weeks, Tallahassee had not approved staff to wear protective gear until well over a month into the pandemic's arrival in South Florida.

Tallahassee officials declared on the public website through dissemination of propaganda emails that every effort was being made to protect inmates from COVID-19. These efforts were simply to require all staff members to self-report any symptoms and to stay home if running a fever. No staff member was ordered to take a swab test or had their temperature taken at the front gate before being admitted sans mask. Take a moment to reflect on the honor and veracity of Florida Department of Corrections Officers in the cases of Darren Rainey and Cheryl Weimar. Would you trust these foxes with your chicken coop?

The women here began to sicken, at first just those few whose work assignments gave them near constant exposure to staff supervisors from the outside community, again without masks or gloves on either side. The infected women incubated and interacted with the compound at large for quite some time before being sent to the infirmary and later to the hospital.

In addition, it became evident that officers and other staff were bringing their symptoms with them to work. So goes Tallahassee's reliance on self-reporting versus a scientific swab test. At least one upright and conscientious officer was forcibly removed from the compound. Still, no staff members were tested. Realizing the genie was out of the bottle, a weak effort was made at social distancing, allowing the staff to wear PPE, and keeping the inmates separated by dormitory when eating in the chow hall. Still, people got sick. Medical declared the inmates were not sick enough for observation in the infirmary, though some had fevers of 102. The Chief Health Officer declared

the sick would remain in the dorms along with the well. COVID-19 continued surging through the dorms.

Finally, in mid-April masks were issued to inmates, and staff were required to wear PPE. The compound was shut down; only those inmates necessary to operations such as kitchen and laundry went to work. Then Tallahassee made an important command decision. All prisons throughout the state were required to move their inmates into dorms according to work assignments. The idea was all of the kitchen workers scattered in various dorms would be housed together, and the same with each department. Except...Tallahassee did not take any consideration for prisons located in COVID-19 hotspots.

Without testing any of the inmates, Tallahassee ordered the moves. What started as a storm turned into a tidal wave. Within two weeks 75 percent of my dorm fell ill. Spreading the infected from dorm to dorm effectively brought COVID-19 to every corner of Camp Prisioney Land. Belatedly we got the nose swab test a week after the shuffle. Only 25 of my 100 person dorm remained non-infected and were removed to the chapel or to the vocational building, where they slept on the floor. Because second swab tests were not ordered after the incubation period, many of the inmates originally considered healthy were incubating. This was an exercise in futility as the allegedly virus-free inmates inexorably fell symptomatic from exposure. No dorm, nor the chapel, nor the vocational building was free of sick inmates.

I became extremely ill and was taken to the infirmary due to respiratory distress. However, I didn't get a bed. Although the twelve beds were empty, I was isolated in a filthy holding cell. A mattress lay in the corner amid clumps of hair and dirt. I decided if they wanted to check on me, the officers and nurses would damn well have to open the door, or at least the flap. With the last of my strength, I dragged the mattress across the cell and flopped it lengthwise across the door. All I could do was collapse on top and drag a blanket over myself.

Which is worse: wondering if you are really sick and they are keeping it from you, or having them shoot you in the fundament three times a day for five days with the expensive antibiotics and putting you on the oxygen tank thereby confirming you are very sick? The nurses would come to the door and open the flap to check I was still breathing. There is some comfort in that action.

Would I have contracted COVID-19 had I been issued a mask early on? If the staff were allowed to wear masks and PPE, could the virus have spread so rapidly here? Would mandatory testing of the staff have resulted in more infected people being removed from contact with vulnerable inmates? Did Tallahassee's action of commingling untested inmates from dorm to dorm cause greater exposure and more infections? Finally, due to the one time swab test, is Tallahassee getting away with under-reporting the number of infections?

I will never know the answers to these questions. I recovered. Birds are singing, and the sun is shining. Still, I know inmates who are in the hospital very ill and on ventilators. May the sun shine on you friends.

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