

## Approaching Christmas 2020 In an Oregon Prison: COVID 19 & Civil Rights

Today the Oregon Corrections Enterprises (OCE) director for our facility announced that due to a 27% COVID-19 infection rate measured in the inmate population and a 20% infection rate in the officer population, OCE inmate workers must now wear CDC recommended N95 masks in our cubicles while on the phone. OCE is the company that runs all for-profit convict labor contracts inside Oregon prisons. This director then singled out a Hispanic prisoner for wearing one of the cloth masks that were provided to every prisoner in ODOC in August. They were manufactured in an OCE prison labor shop from old prisoner shirts. The prisoner responded that the three paper N95 masks distributed by the facility every thirty or more days wear out too quickly. On the ODOC Facebook pages, official posts of refurbishing outdated masks with new elastic have received many enthusiastic, albeit uneducated likes. Nobody asked whether rotted elastics might signal a rotted N95 mask. The prisoner had asked his unit officer for a replacement of the OCE-required N95 mask but the officer said he did not have any available. The prisoner asked the OCE director for another mask. The OCE director repeated that the prisoner would need to find another N95 before returning from lunch and stated "It is not OCE's responsibility to supply the N95 masks they require their workers to wear". He went on to tell the prisoner that he could receive a daily program failure if he returned to work without the required N95 mask and would be sent back to his unit for the day. A "daily failure" is a permanent mark on a prisoner's record that can cause a loss of good time or hurt chances of parole. A notice was posted in our work area mandating the use of N95 masks for prisoner workers, it also mandated the use of NON-MEDICAL masks for OCE staff like the cloth mask the Hispanic prisoner wore, or like prison or OCE officers wear in their personal lives. As most of us know, it is ill advised to puncture cloth masks unnecessarily so as to decorate them – it creates entries for viral particles and is to be avoided. One staff member has bedazzled her mask, a Sergeant has silk screened a celebrity wrestler, Rick Flayer, on his mask. My personal favorite is the officer who special ordered his cloth mask with the phrase *"it's not about safety, it's about compliance"*, a personal ethos he applies in all of his work. He is known for avidly staring at your member as you provide a urinalysis sample, unlike any other officer in the facility. Under this policy, all onus for safety and compliance is put on prisoners with consequences that steal years away from us and our families. A policy which OCE does not have the infrastructure or aptitude to meet or make obtainable for prisoners. The officers and staff who brought Covid in by refusing to wear masks are held to a lower standard with no consequences for non-compliance.

There used to be jobs for the mediocre of America when we were home to a formidable manufacturing bloc. Persons could float down the path of least resistance of life and work on a line in a factory, pushing a button or pulling a lever for 25 years. As a widget, they could buy a house, a car, go on vacation, put their kids through college and afford to have hobbies. At times our officers are put on unpaid leave while being investigated, prospectively to never return. One officer went to Home Depot when he thought he lost his job. Another went back to cleaning houses like she did before she was put in charge of my life with unchecked discretion. Of course, both of these unskilled workers are back in their former positions, spouting their conservative world views, while depending upon a bloated state bureaucracy over reaching into the personal lives of the civilian population in order to maintain their unnecessary positions at the expense of tax payers. I agree we should create jobs for these unremarkable people. But corrections officers are not the jobs for the otherwise barely-employable. The state of Oregon is going to close three minimum security prisons over the next two years. These prisons are filled with men who leave their facilities every day and work in local communities to clean and maintain state and municipal assets without incident. These facilities and their administrative

infrastructures are absolutely unnecessary. they are a drain on the state budget that would be better spent in social work interventions, employment and education. Not providing a dirty building to sleep in at night at a cost of over forty thousand dollars per prisoner per year. The rash of internet testimonials from corrections officers scared of losing their jobs is a symptom of America's globalized capitalist competition. It happened to the coal minors just as it happened to all of the stable keepers at the advent of the automobile. The Oregon State government should help these people find real work and not continue to profit on violence and substance addictions.

As the OCE director outlines his absurdist double-blind policy, I ponder his bodily waste. the man who cleans OCEs staff bathrooms has been imprisoned for more than 40 years, since he was 15. He was raped by his father and trafficked by his father for drugs. When he saw his father grooming his younger siblings for the same, he shot his sleeping father in the head. for that he is here this long. Cleaning urine off toilet rims and brushing fecal stains inside toilet bowls. The OCE director and his staff do not care to know us or help us. Their position in society is to profit off of prison labor and to benefit from the unfair sentencing of a child rape victim.

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