

This Moment is About Much More than COVID19:

One inmate provides insight into current conditions in an Oregon State prison situated in the State Capital.

From behind prison walls, the business of COVID19 is much like other external events. Recreational marijuana dispensaries, Donald Trump, the multiple destructions of Puerto Rico, and caged children suffering at our borders, all of these are defining in impact, even to us here, and yet so distant. The television flashes pictures of a little toddler at the border torn from her parent, crying. I think about her all the time, that little girl crying for her mother as they separate her. I cry when they read the names of the kids from Sandy Hook. The total eclipse of the sun had to be experienced through television even as the world outside my window became black at midday. As the threat and damages of COVID19 emerge, I cannot trust my own impressions. Informed by the opinionated filtrations of friends, family and talking heads, I can't gauge how concerned I should feel in order to be responsible. Unlike other events, this plague will soon live inside me, directly experienced, no longer by television, of this I have no doubt.

The delayed and gradual response of the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) alone, is enough to inspire a sentiment of certain fate. Six days ago was the first time I smelled bleach since my entry into Oregon's criminal justice system five years ago, as I was called to an Oregon Correctional Enterprises (OCE) call center to wipe surfaces with soaked rags, using spray bottles. Three other inmates and an officer were awkwardly going through the motions, guessing at what we should do. Mostly, I felt resentful of being awakened on a Sunday morning (my only morning I can sleep past five thirty am) unwarned and uninformed; resentful to be jarred awake and yelled at to report to the officer's station. Once I had presented myself at the guard station, I was told I would report to the work area where I spend nine hours Monday through Friday, making around \$140 per month, to clean – off the clock, without pay. The next week, strips of tape marked our halls to enforce social distancing. Not surprisingly, they are only about four feet apart. Some officers have begun to report to work wearing cloth masks as of this last week. Our small chow hall is filled with closely-situated metal tables built with four spaces to sit. We are now limited to two inmates per table. Between uses, sometimes the tables are wiped with a diluted cleaning agent called Virastat. At other times it is our blue window cleaner in spray bottles, in lieu of any industrial cleaner or actual disinfectant. Even if an effective cleaner was used as ODOC says is the standard, we sit at an empty table as soon as it is available. There is never a full minute passing between occupants. We have also requested our overhead fans be turned off, lest a sneeze be propelled to every corner of the hall. The fans still spin. In the age of COVID19, many half-measures never can make a single whole measure.

I feel staff and officers should take our safety seriously. Mass incarceration swallows the most vulnerable people and places them at the mercy of the most predatory. But when an officers' only required credentials are having a GED and passing a background check, there is little hope for positive outcomes. They are submersed in a culture of arrogant dominance, self-righteous hero narratives, and xenophobia. Their code of silence prohibits questioning each other, let alone asking for help from outside experts so as to do their jobs better. Even the rare exception, an officer who treats us with respect, would be ineffective if they were more influential.

The manner in which prisons have been allowed to evolve and grow condemn all of us to infection from this scourge. I've seen industrial dog kennels larger than our cells that hold two men. Some prisons, like Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP), only allow inmates to shower three times a week, 160 men at a time in standing water, naked beside one another. We all share the same surfaces because we are less than you, smaller spaces because we are less than you. If our industries were to shut down, the DMV would lose 2/3 of its customer service division, the OSH and Salem Area health facilities would cease having clean sheets from our laundries. State government forms and applications used to complete administrative work and provide help to you, will stop being printed. How will you apply for unemployment if our print shop stops producing your forms? Elected and appointed state officials would run out of cards to hand out to you when they smile and tell you they are doing their best for us. Your state uses slave labor to perform essential services and you will be crippled if we are lost.

The urgency to protect us feels too little too late. America's prisons have had hundreds of years to become something that serves the greater good. But they have not. Your DOC is subject only to criticism, not meaningful oversight. Despite all of ODOC's scandals and crimes, the same officials are kept and recycled. They will make public statements about their

altruistic intentions for our health and safety, begging your compassion as they “do their best”. This week DOC transferred prisoners to my facility from one with infected men.

If you want to help us, please pressure ODOC to sell us over the counter (OTC) medications to provide relief for our inevitable suffering. We are limited to cough drops only. What harm can come from allowing us cough drops that have mentholatum and zinc? Theraflu? Herb teas? At OSCI, we receive commissary eleven days after we order it, even though it arrives the very next week. Every day I walk to work and see the items I ordered the previous week sitting in a bag on a shelf. The DOC suffers the same problems all institutions do. Executive management get training, resources and investment. Middle management are told to implement petty ideas conceived up at the top. Facility workers receive none of the benefits of training or agency, and thus do not buy in as they carelessly go through the motions or engage in the laziest or most punitive methods. When you receive vague answers, ask for details. Poor and colored, we will die because in America, that is who goes to prison.

Mass incarceration is a prism, and COVID19 is only one facet. Please take up this conversation beyond this one disease.

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~transcribed by Rebecca Whetstine, Project WIT (Whatever It Takes!) nothing added and nothing interpreted