



PENNSYLVANIA
PRISON SOCIETY
justice & compassion

**Practical Information and Recommendations for County Commissioners and
Wardens on Mitigating the Spread of Covid-19 in County Prisons**

April, 2020

Early data from New York indicates that coronavirus **spreads seven-time faster in a prison** than in the surrounding community.ⁱ Once inside a prison, it quickly accelerates infection beyond the prison walls.

This memorandum by the Pennsylvania Prison Societyⁱⁱ provides county commissioners information to allow you to effectively engage with your warden on preventing, mitigating, and managing the spread of COVID-19 your county prison.

It is organized around nine no- or low-cost recommendations. The endnotes highlight which Pennsylvania counties are employing these recommendations. We compiled this information through a [survey](#) sent to all 62 county prisons in early March. Please encourage your county to answer if they have not already.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Prison Society is a Resource

If you would like to discuss your county or have other questions, contact Prison Society Prison Monitoring Director, Joshua Alvarez jalvarez@prisonsociety.org.

You may refer people calling your county with questions about your prison or criminal justice system to the Prison Society. We maintain a [COVID-19 information](#) page on our website. Dozens of families contact us daily with questions. Typical questions we field include: *Is my county releasing people in response to the crises? Can I get help setting up a video call? Has anyone in my county prison tested positive for coronavirus?* We are happy to answer these questions. You may refer people to us via our [COVID-19 information page](#), the email info@prisonsociety.org, or 215-564-7447. If you refer people to us, we ask that you please fill our [county survey](#) and update us if and when you have a positive test, so that we can provide accurate information.

Nine Recommendations to Discuss with your Warden

1. **Take the temperature of staff and new admissions before they enter the facility.** *It is critical to prevent staff and new admissions with fevers into the facility. You may need to plan where people with fevers can be held.^{iv}*
2. **Isolate new admissions for fourteen days.**^v *We know several counties are doing this. Others are isolating new admissions for shorter periods. It can take up to 14 days from infection for symptoms of the virus to appear. If your facility is isolating for less than 14 days, you are running the risk of having new, infected admissions enter and infect the general population.*
3. **Suspended the medical co-pay.** *Most counties charge people in custody a fee to see a medical provider except in certain circumstances. It is critical this fee be suspended. All research confirms that even a minimal co-pay discourages people in custody from identifying themselves as sick and seeking care. It is important to catch and isolate anyone who is sick.^{vi}*
4. **Provide free access to soap, sinks, and disinfectants.** *In many counties soap and disinfectant are typically available through the commissary for a charge. Several counties are providing these items for free.^{vii} In some facilities, people in custody do not have access to sinks in areas where they eat or take recreation. Can you provide hand sanitizer (we recognize some facilities ban hand sanitizer) or take other steps to enable washing?^{viii}*
5. **Isolate someone when they are sick.** *Do you require an off-site location (trailer, otherwise unused building) or other action to do this?^{ix} Do not place these individuals in cells designated for solitary confinement, which could be a disincentive for someone to self-report illness.*
6. **Continue to provide recreation.** *Anxiety among staff and people in custody are running high. Continuing to provide recreation, as the PA DOC has done even while they have “quarantined” all of their facilities, is key to mitigating the stress of this crisis and maintaining order. All recreation equipment should be disinfected between use, i.e. multiple times a day.*
7. **Increase opportunities for people in custody to stay in touch with their families.** *Increase or start free phone calls or video calls where possible. In the absence of phone or video capacity, provide free materials for people in custody to write and send letters home.^x*



8. Provide the public information the web to help address the concerns and questions of families, advocates, and others. *Your prison, your office, and everyone are getting calls from worried and confused family members, the press, and advocates. If you are able to put information on your website, like the [PA DOC COVID-19 dashboard](#), you can refer people to it. If you do not have the ability to post your information on your own website, you can provide information to the Prison Society to post on our [COVID-19 landing page](#).*

9. **Care for your correctional staff.** *Staff are worried. They may be calling out. How are you able to demonstrate caring and support? Offering free counselling is recommended but costly. Providing free take-out meals or even a letter from the county commissioners commending the correctional staff can make a difference.*

Finally, the best way to slow the wildfire-like spread of the virus in prison is to reduce the number of people in prison. We recognize that reducing the prison population requires a multitude of criminal justice actors working together. We know many of you are engaged with your criminal justice partners in making this happen.^{xi}

ⁱ See petition filed by New York Legal Aid, *People ex rel. Stoughton v. Brann*, No. 260154/2020, at ¶ 3 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Mar. 25, 2020).

ⁱⁱ Founded in 1787 by signers of the Declaration of Independence, the Prison Society is the nation's oldest human rights organization and the correctional ombuds for Pennsylvania. Commonwealth law empowers the Society to monitor prison conditions by meeting privately with all people in county and state custody.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thank you Beaver, Blair, Lycoming, Mifflin, Philadelphia, and Westmorland Counties for responding promptly.

^{iv} Westmorland is taking the temperature of all new admissions and sending any new admissions running a temperature to an area hospital.

^v Philadelphia and PA DOC are isolating new admissions for 14 days.

^{vi} Philadelphia eliminated the medical co-pay years ago because it hinders people in custody seeking needed care.

PA DOC has suspended the co-pay during the pandemic. PA DOC has limited this suspension to individuals experiencing flu-like symptoms. The PA DOC approach is confusing to people in custody who now have to decide if the symptoms they are experiencing will be considered exempt from the co-pay or not. The Prison Society recommends counties suspend the co-pay completely during the pandemic.

^{vii} Lycoming is providing soap for free. PA DOC is providing soap and disinfectant for free.

^{viii} PA DOC has installed portable handwashing stations in several areas.

^{ix} Bucks County criminal justice stakeholders worked to release 141 people from their prison in order to prepare a medical isolation wing.

^x Philadelphia and the PA DOC have instituted or increased free phone time. The PA DOC has instituted new, free video calls.

^{xi} Allegheny County has taken the most comprehensive action, releasing more than 700 people from the county prison. See <https://www.wtae.com/article/inmates-released-from-allegheny-county-jail-due-to-coronavirus-concerns/31953103#>

