

# Coronavirus cases surge again at Fort Dix federal prison in New Jersey

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At least 600 of 2,700 prisoners at Fort Dix Federal Correctional Institution in New Jersey—that is, nearly one quarter of inmates—have been infected with the novel coronavirus. The prison has more cases than any other federal facility, and the situation is worsening, according to prisoners and their families.

The low-security prison is on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, which is approximately 40 miles east of Philadelphia. It is overseen by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and houses more inmates than any federal prison in the country. Its prisoners have included Kwame Kilpatrick, the former mayor of Detroit who was convicted of racketeering, fraud, bribery and extortion, and Martin Shkreli (a.k.a. “pharma bro”), the former hedge fund manager convicted of securities fraud.

The outbreak at the Fort Dix prison occurs as New Jersey logs record numbers of new daily cases of the coronavirus. The rate of transmission in the state also is poised to exceed one, which indicates an expanding outbreak. The growth in infections is the direct result of the herd immunity policy that state and federal officials of both parties are pursuing across the country.

The situation at Fort Dix prison has been replicated on a smaller scale in prisons and jails around the country. The National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice found that by mid-November, more than 850 facilities had recorded outbreaks. The infection rate among prisoners in the United States, home to the largest prison population in the world, is twice that of the population as a whole.

Nicole Barnes, the fiancée of a prisoner at Fort Dix, told *NJ Spotlight* that she and family members of other prisoners have counted almost 700 coronavirus cases at the facility—and they have not gotten information from every unit. Officials at the jail routinely deny

applications for compassionate release, and inmates apparently are still being transferred to the prison.

“I am in the middle of the largest COVID-19 outbreak in the federal prison system and I’m sick,” Siddeeq Williams wrote to a federal judge on January 2. “I don’t want to die here. Please send me home where I can get the medical help I need.” Williams, who has five children, received a 10-year sentence on drug distribution charges. He reported that he had contracted the coronavirus in October and still has symptoms. Prison staff are not actively testing inmates and are ignoring his requests for medical care, he said.

This is the second time that Fort Dix prison has reported more coronavirus cases than any other federal facility. A transfer of about 300 prisoners into the prison in October occurred at about the same time as an increase in coronavirus cases. More than 12 of the transferred prisoners tested positive for the virus, but the BOP implausibly denied that the outbreak was related to the transfer.

Senators Robert Menendez and Cory Booker, both Democrats, and all 10 of New Jersey’s Democratic representatives in the US House, asked the BOP to end the transfer of prisoners to Fort Dix and implement systematic testing of prisoners and staff. In response to the lawmakers’ criticisms, federal officials claimed that prisoners transferred to Fort Dix who tested positive for the coronavirus were placed in isolation in a separate building until they tested negative. The BOP briefly halted transfers but resumed them after November 23.

In December, assistant US Attorney Angelica M. Sinopole stated in a letter to a federal judge that the prison had gotten the outbreak under control. The BOP had taken “proper steps to prevent further spread of infection, and many of the infected individuals already have recovered,” she wrote. As of December 17, 13

inmates had tested positive for the virus.

But others contradict Sinopole's claims. The "BOP has failed to keep these people in its custody safe and healthy," Tess Borden, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), told nj.com. It has failed to test, quarantine and release inmates properly, she said. "Every time I speak to someone at Fort Dix or to their families, I hear desperation on the other end of the line. People fear for their lives."

At around the time that Sinopole was writing her rosy letter, a man was transferred to Fort Dix from Ray Brook federal prison in New York. He tested negative for the virus twice before leaving Ray Brook. Upon arrival at Fort Dix, he was quarantined with about 60 other prisoners from across the country, according to his mother, who spoke to nj.com on condition of anonymity. He later tested positive for the virus and was again placed into quarantine, in a room with no hot water.

"It's like they are sending you to Fort Dix to try and kill you," said the woman, with justification. The man is scheduled to be released on February 2. "Why would they send you there when you have a short amount of time like him?" his mother asked.

Other prisoners have testified about the egregious lack of safeguards at the prison. Larry Murphy told a judge that after he turned himself in, he went into quarantine at the prison for 30 days. When he emerged, he was housed in a unit with a "large number of people [who] are still sick and exhibiting symptoms," he said. Another inmate stated in a court filing that staff had not taken his temperature in months.

Menendez, one of the signatories of the letter to the BOP, has feigned outrage at the resurgence of the infection at Fort Dix. "The BOP has had months to devise a plan to control the outbreak and stop the spread and they failed. It's shameful," he told NJ Advance Media. "With cases on the rise again at FCI Fort Dix, I urge the BOP to take this seriously and do everything possible to protect the health and safety of the staff and incarcerated individuals." Menendez demanded no concrete remedies and named no specific punishments for a failure to comply.

Although the BOP has started vaccinating facility staff, no employees at Fort Dix prison have been vaccinated yet, according to *NJ Spotlight*. The BOP has not announced when prisoners will receive the vaccine.

The deplorable conditions at Fort Dix prison do not result from mistakes or oversights. Menendez and his counterparts in the Democratic Party have joined Trump in imposing a policy of herd immunity, allowing the virus to spread virtually unchecked. Like the working class as a whole, the prison population is treated as entirely expendable.



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