

Michigan officials confirm 121 cases of COVID-19 variant at state prison in Ionia

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The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) revealed on Wednesday that it had confirmed 90 cases of the more infectious B.1.1.7 variant of the COVID-19 coronavirus at the state-run Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility in Ionia.

An MDHHS press release said that daily testing of prisoners and staff confirmed the positive cases of the variant. The statement explained, “This testing occurred after an employee at the prison was found to have the variant and the Michigan Department of Corrections immediately began to test daily, all prisoners and staff.”

Of an initial set of 95 samples tested by MDHHS, 90 were positive with 88 inmates and two staff members infected with B.1.1.7. The press statement said, “There are more than 100 lab results still pending.”

Late Friday afternoon, Michigan Department of Corrections (MDC) officials confirmed another 31 cases at the Ionia prison, bringing the total to 121 confirmed with the variant that was first detected in the United Kingdom in November from a sample taken in September.

Prison officials also confirmed new cases of the highly contagious variant at prisons in Macomb County and a Jackson prison health facility, although the specific number of cases was not reported.

Chris Gautz, a spokesman for MDC, said on Friday that among the 47 new confirmed cases were 14 that had been carried by Bellamy Creek prisoners transferred to the Macomb Correctional Facility in Lenox Township and two to the Duane Waters Health Center in Jackson.

Indicating the speed of the spread of B.1.1.7, Gautz wrote in an email, “Some COVID positive prisoners were moved to Macomb and our health center in Jackson to COVID positive units there before we learned of the variant.” Gautz then claimed that, so far, “there has been no spread to the other two facilities where these prisoners with the variant went,” and then added, “There are still

more tests coming in.”

The Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility is located in western Michigan approximately 30 miles east of Grand Rapids. There are 1,678 inmates and 406 employees at the Ionia facility, which is the newest in Michigan’s 31-prison system. It was opened in December 2001 for male prisoners 18 years of age and older.

The cases of the coronavirus variant in Michigan’s prisons represent 65 percent of the 211 total confirmed cases in the state. Cases have been identified in 12 counties across the state, with the majority in Washtenaw County, where Ann Arbor is located, and Wayne County, where Detroit is located.

The instances in Washtenaw County were concentrated at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, which forced university administrators to issue a stay-at-home order and suspend athletic events beginning February 3. Less than one week later, the university was reopened with little understanding of the spread of the new variant.

There are 42 states with identified cases of the B.1.1.7 variant in the US and Michigan has the third largest number, behind the states of Florida and California. As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* last week, “Despite the recent decline in the United States cases, the new variant, B.1.1.7, also known as the UK or Kent variant, is causing widespread disquiet among public health officials.”

Health experts and epidemiologists have warned that the UK variant is 40 to 80 percent more transmissible than earlier variants of the coronavirus. Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, a Harvard epidemiologist and health economist, characterized the transition to the B.1.1.7 variant as “the end of one pandemic and a beginning of a second one with the more contagious and lethal one which will be dominant in mid-March.” Feigl-Ding tweeted, “We will be soon slammed very hard.”

The other two variants—P.1 (discovered in South Africa

from samples collected in August) and B.1.351 (discovered in Brazil in January)—were both confirmed to be circulating in the US by the end of January.

When asked about his recent statements that the darkest days of the pandemic could lie ahead, Dr. Michael Osterholm, epidemiologist, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, told Minnesota Public Radio on Thursday, “I think right now what we’re seeing is basically the lull before the storm ... imagine we’re all sitting on this beautiful sand beach on the Gulf somewhere. Blue skies, temperature of 80 degrees, slight breeze, not a cloud in the sky. And we’re trying to tell people, ‘Get ready to evacuate.’ Everyone is saying ‘Why? this makes no sense.’ But we can see that Category 5 hurricane 400 miles south of the beach heading straight towards the beach. And that’s what these variants represent right now.”

Osterholm then explained that the known variants are mutations of the virus that have characteristics of variants of concern (VOCs) that typically exhibit three important features: 1) they transmit more easily, 2) they cause more serious illness and 3) they are able to avoid the immune protections associated with either vaccination or natural infection.

Osterholm concluded his comments with the following, “When you look at the vaccine, it’s coming and it’s in right now with the B.1.1.7. This vaccine will work but we’re not going to have nearly enough in time. Our studies have shown that if we keep up the current vaccine efforts we’re doing now, by the end of March we will still have 30 million out of 54 million persons in this country over age 65 who have not had a drop of vaccine. Those people are going to be at high risk for this virus. And I think it’s going to take off in early to mid-March. And we’re gonna see that next big peak, and it will very possibly exceed what we saw in January.”



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