COVID-19 most likely causing superspreader event at Alligator Alcatraz

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More than a thousand people are held in “Alligator Alcatraz,” a South Florida detention center that attorneys and advocates say is “bordering on torture” because of its inhumane conditions. The case of 38-year-old Venezuelan social media influencer Luis Manuel Rivas Velásquez makes the crisis clear. His lawyer, Eric Lee, reports that Velásquez developed severe breathing problems, most consistent with a serious COVID-19 infection, yet was denied medical care for two full days. He eventually collapsed, unresponsive, inside the chain-link cage where he was being held.

Fellow detainees say they had to drag Velásquez out themselves, with one former nurse attempting CPR while guards stood by, apparently unable even to take his pulse. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) downplayed the incident, claiming he had simply “fainted,” and said he was sent to Miami’s Kendall Regional Medical Center only “out of precaution.” Independent accounts, however, make clear his condition was far more serious.

After a brief return to “Alligator Alcatraz,” where he was labeled as having a vague “respiratory infection,” Velásquez was quietly transferred to a facility in El Paso, Texas. There, though his health remained fragile, he was denied access to his own medical records. In a desperate call to his attorney, he pleaded, “I don’t want to die in here,” and even requested deportation back to Venezuela to escape the neglect and abuse.

Beyond individual cases, there are widespread reports of a respiratory outbreak, most likely COVID-19, tearing through the facility. Attorneys and detainees say the “vast majority” are sick with symptoms like coughing and shortness of breath. Requests for masks have been denied, and detainees are allowed to shower only once or twice a week, leaving the environment filthy and unsafe. Attorney Eric Lee told *The Guardian* that “Alligator Alcatraz” has become a “petri dish for disease,” a description that underscores the deliberate neglect and the high risk of viral spread.

The current summer surge in COVID-19 has made the situation inside “Alligator Alcatraz” even more dangerous. Nationally, modeling from the Pandemic Mitigation Collaborative shows cases rising more than 50 percent from June to July, with over half a million Americans infected at any given time and an estimated 1,300 to 2,100 excess deaths. The CDC’s wastewater data confirm “high or very high” transmission levels in Miami-Dade and surrounding counties as of August 2025—the very region where the detention center is located. This means detainees are being confined in one of the nation’s worst COVID hot spot, under conditions almost guaranteed to spread the virus.

The detention center is situated about 50 miles west of Miami, deep in the Everglades. With no staff housing on site, nearly all employees commute daily from Miami and other South Florida communities. This constant flow in and out makes local outbreaks directly relevant to conditions inside. Combined with the facility’s documented lack of hygiene, limited showers and frequent medical emergencies, the risk of viral spread among detainees is not just likely, but inevitable.

The danger is obvious. With staff commuting from areas of high transmission, it is highly likely that COVID-19 has been carried into “Alligator Alcatraz,” turning the facility into a potential superspreader site. Detainees and even a former corrections officer have described widespread illness marked by coughing and breathing problems. One former officer said he contracted COVID-19 while working there, a direct result of the unsanitary conditions and lack of

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protections.

Despite these reports, detainees say requests for masks are denied, and that they are allowed to shower only once or twice a week—conditions that make viral spread inevitable. Homeland Security and Florida state officials continue to deny or downplay the crisis, insisting there are “no cases” of COVID-19 or tuberculosis, and claiming medical care is available around the clock. Attorneys counter that this is an active cover-up, pointing to officials’ refusal to answer questions or provide basic transparency. Taken together, the denials, the filthy conditions, and the high rates of infection in surrounding communities, appear less like negligence and more like a deliberate attempt to conceal a public health emergency inside the detention center.

The operation of “Alligator Alcatraz” is deeply bound up with Florida politics and a web of private contractors. Officially, it functions as a state-federal partnership with ICE and is overseen by the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) under Governor Ron DeSantis. In practice, much of its daily operation is outsourced. The largest contracts go to Critical Response Strategies LLC, paid $78 million for staffing, training and security, and to CDR Maguire and its affiliates, which manage engineering, emergency response and health care. Other companies, including SLSCO Ltd., IRG Global Emergency Management and Granny’s Alliance Holdings, have also profited through construction and support contracts.

The price tag is a staggering $450 million per year. DHS has claimed that FEMA funds cover much of this cost, but federal lawyers say Florida has received no such funds. Instead, the state appears to be drawing from a massive “emergency management” fund that Governor DeSantis can access without legislative approval, a setup that shields the program from oversight while enriching politically connected contractors.

The looting operations are further illuminated by details on staffing costs. The warden earns $125 an hour, about $260,000 a year before overtime, while the lowest-paid badge administrators still make $38 an hour. These inflated rates are possible because the contractors running the facility were not chosen through normal competitive bidding. Instead, they benefited from emergency powers invoked by Governor DeSantis, allowing politically connected firms to secure lucrative contracts without oversight.

This has led to allegations of “dirty money” influencing contract awards.

CDR Maguire and its executives have been described as “prolific donors” to Republican leaders, giving nearly $4 million since 2018 to state PACs, including $500,000 to DeSantis’s Florida Freedom Fund and $1 million to a DeSantis-aligned federal PAC in 2023. The company’s CEO was later appointed by DeSantis to the Florida International University Board of Trustees, underscoring their close ties. Other contractors, such as SLSCO Ltd. and IRG Global Emergency Management, also made large donations to DeSantis’s PACs and the Florida Republican Party before winning contracts. These contributions paved the way for lucrative deals, despite many of the firms having little or no prior experience running detention facilities.

Beyond the financial mechanisms, the facility’s politics are seen by some as promoting a “fascistic agenda” aimed at deterring immigration through deliberately imposing harsh conditions. Attorney Eric Lee put it bluntly, stating, “I’ve never seen treatment so deliberately cruel and explicit, more or less explicitly aimed at disincentivizing people from immigrating to the United States based on how they’re treated.” In this logic, the virus that causes COVID-19 has become a weapon in the hands of these fascistic grifters, allowing the virus and other diseases to spread unchecked as part of a system that punishes migrants by endangering their health and lives inside what amount to modern-day dungeons.

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