



# ALASKA CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

*"Walking Alaska's Toughest Beat"*

July 7, 2020

Representative Fields  
State Capitol Room 412  
Juneau AK, 99801

Re: House State Affairs Committee COVID-19 Hearing on Frontline Worker Safety

Representative Fields,

It is imperative that Correctional Officers and other first responders, who are risking their own and their families' lives, be protected, which in turn protects all Alaskans. Given the constraints of a correctional institution, the Department of Corrections (DOC) cannot successfully adhere to all the Governor's COVID-19 Public Health Mandates,<sup>1</sup> yet Correctional Officers continue to go to work and protect the public in facilities in which social distancing is simply not possible. Correctional Officers know they are exposing themselves and their families to this highly contagious virus. They desperately need the necessary personal protective equipment and additional resources in order to protect all Alaskans.

The State can only deal with the virus effectively if it knows the extent of the spread of COVID-19 within Alaska facilities. The DOC should follow the lead of other states by drastically increasing COVID-19 testing within correctional facilities; yet, when questioned by Legislators, the DOC admitted that it had declined free COVID-19 testing from medical facilities at multiple correctional facilities. COVID-19 testing should be made available to all Correctional Officers and first responders. The State still does not know how a Goose Creek Correctional Center inmate or an Anchorage Correctional Complex inmate, both of whom have been incarcerated for many years, tested positive for COVID-19. We understand the State does not desire to see an increase in diagnosed cases but turning down assistance for testing gives the impression of putting politics before Officer safety.

Governor Dunleavy made a commitment to all Alaskans that Public Safety would be his top priority. Further, in the 2019 State of the State address, the Governor asserted, *"To our legislators,*

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these Mandates cannot and have not been followed within the DOC. These include social distancing (Health Mandate 011) (cannot keep six feet distance in correctional facilities); Intrastate Travel (Health Mandate 012) (inmates are transferred between facilities bringing new chances for COVID-19 infection); Personal Care Services and Gatherings (Health Mandate 009) (inmates are held and participate in groups activities of more than 10 and over 100); and Statewide Closures Restaurants, Bars, Entertainment Health Mandate 003) (inmates continue to eat meals in group settings which Correctional Officers must monitor).

*I'm asking you to make public safety a priority... But to the criminals, and to the rapists and molesters who see women and children as nothing more than opportunities, I say this to you: We will do everything in our power to stop you, apprehend you, and put you in prison for a very long time.*" Yet now, due to the dangers of COVID-19, the State determined that these same criminals deserve a pay increase, while Correctional Officers, who put their lives, and their families' lives, on the line to keep Alaskans safe, are being denied any additional COVID-19 compensation. The State should recognize the inappropriateness of this inequity, especially considering the State has already chosen to exclude Correctional Officers and other first responders from the Emergency Family Medical Leave Expansion Act, which would have otherwise allowed first responders to take leave to care for their children.

COVID-19 has been declared a national and State public health emergency. More than 500,000 people have died and there are more than 10 million confirmed cases worldwide. On June 29, 2020, the World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the "worst is yet to come."<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant additional dangers to Correctional Officers and has had a devastating impact on correctional facilities. Nationally, as of June 30, 2020, 52,649 inmates have contracted COVID-19 and 615 inmates have died.<sup>3</sup> Per the American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network, 54 Correctional Officers have lost their lives in the line of duty due to COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> Thankfully, none of those deaths were in Alaska, but those incarcerated in correctional facilities and the staff who work there are at significant risk of infection and outbreak. At one time a Chicago prison had the largest COVID-19 outbreak in the US.<sup>5</sup> An April 2020 news article documents yet another reason why Officers are in even more danger now than ever before due to inmate unrest and riots.<sup>6</sup> The State of Ohio has tested more than 5,000 people in its prisons and found COVID-19 prevalence at an alarming rate.<sup>7</sup>

Correctional Officers have legitimate health and safety concerns. They must work in crowded correctional facilities, while trying to minimize their own exposure to COVID-19, avoid exposing their families, all while protecting those they supervise. Because Officers and inmates have to be in close contact with each other, for example performing inmate searches which are required before any inmate can be admitted into a correctional facility or when an Officer must physically restrain a combative inmate before they injure themselves or someone else, Officers are significantly susceptible to COVID-19 exposure.

Early on, ACOA raised concerns with the State as COVID-19 became more of a threat and prisons in other states began experiencing mass infections leading to many inmate and Officer deaths. ACOA took a proactive stance to try to ensure the DOC was looking ahead to do everything possible to protect Correctional Officers. As an example, ACOA was concerned, and remains concerned, about inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and what will be made available to Officers, as health care workers within the facilities are not the only ones being exposed. During a national and state health emergency is the time to make as much PPE as possible

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-53227219>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>

<sup>4</sup> July 6, 2020 Facebook Post by the American Correctional Officers Intelligence Network - [https://www.facebook.com/American-Correctional-Officer-Intelligence-Network-111196931325/?tn-str=k\\*F](https://www.facebook.com/American-Correctional-Officer-Intelligence-Network-111196931325/?tn-str=k*F)

<sup>5</sup> 2020-04-08 - NY Times - Chicago's Jail Is Top U.S. Hot Spot as Virus Spreads Behind Bars

<sup>6</sup> 2020-04-09 - CNN - Nearly 200 inmates riot after coronavirus in WA facility

<sup>7</sup> 2020-04-20 - NPR - 73% Of Inmates at An Ohio Prison Test Positive For Coronavirus



available to all Correctional Officers and first responders who are on the front-line and most at risk.

Now three Alaska correctional facilities have confirmed COVID-19 cases. Any reasonable safety plan and mitigation strategy should include cooperation. Only together can we come to reasonable and appropriate solutions that will protect Correctional Officers, inmates and the public from the dangers of COVID-19. Working together is key to get through this state and national health emergency with as little loss of life as possible.

Aware of the risks, Correctional Officers continue to perform their duty with dedication and courage, even in facilities with confirmed cases of COVID-19. Alaska's Correctional Officers will continue to walk Alaska's toughest beat and keep the public and inmates safe while Alaska moves through and past the COVID-19 pandemic.



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