

March 12, 2020

Dear Governor Bullock and Director Michael:

We are writing to urge you to immediately develop evidence-based and proactive plans for the prevention and management of COVID-19 in the Montana Department of Corrections and county jails in Montana, which also house DOC inmates. We would like to meet with you within the next two weeks to discuss how you are protecting the health of the people in your custody and the people who work in the prisons and jails.

People in prisons are highly vulnerable to outbreaks of contagious illnesses. They are housed in close quarters and are often in poor health. Without the active engagement of the prison administration, they have little ability to inform themselves about preventive measures, or to take such measures if they do manage to learn of them.

We ask that you immediately reach out to the Department of Public Health and Human Services and Montana Association of Counties to develop plans to address the virus in the prison and county jail systems. This is an urgent matter. Having an appropriate, evidence-based plan in place can help prevent an outbreak and minimize its impact if one does occur. Not having one may cost lives.

While the plan should be developed collaboratively by your department the Department of Health and Human Services, and counties together, some of the critical issues that must be addressed are:

- **Education of the people in your custody:** People housed in the prisons need to be informed about the virus and the measures they can take to minimize their risk of contracting or spreading the virus. They must be educated on the importance of proper handwashing, coughing into their elbows, and social distancing to the extent they can. Information about the spread of the virus, the risks associated with it, and prevention and treatment measures must be based on the best available science.
- **Education of the staff:** Correctional, administrative, and medical staff all must be educated about the virus to protect themselves and their families, as well as the people in their custody.
- **Staffing plans:** Regardless of how many staff stay home because they are sick, the prisons will have to continue functioning. There must be a plan for how necessary functions and services will continue if large numbers of staff are out with the virus.
- **Staffing plans for services provided by prisoners:** Many tasks in prisons, such as food preparation and basic sanitation, are performed by prisoners. The plans for an outbreak must also address how necessary tasks performed by prisoners will continue if large numbers of prisoners are ill.
- **Provision of hygiene supplies:** The most basic aspect of infection control is hygiene. There must be ready access to warm water and adequate hygiene and cleaning supplies, both for handwashing and for cleaning.



PO Box 1968
Missoula, MT 59806
(406) 443-8590
acluname.org

Vickie Christie
President

Caitlin Borgmann
Executive Director



PO Box 1968
Missoula, MT 59806
(406) 443-8590
aclunamontana.org

Vickie Christie
President

Caitlin Borgmann
Executive Director

- **Screening and testing of the people in your custody:** The plan must include guidance, based on the best science available, on how and when to screen and test people in your facilities for the virus.
- **Housing of persons exposed to the virus:** The plan must describe how and where people in the prison system will be housed if they are exposed to the virus, are at high risk of serious illness if they become infected, or become sick with it. *This should not result in prolonged, widespread lock-downs.* Any lock-downs or interruptions in regular activities, such as exercise or visits and phone calls with families or attorneys, should be based solely on the best science available and should be as limited as possible in scope and duration.
- **Treatment:** Courses of treatment must be evidence-based, available immediately, and in compliance with scientifically-based public health protocols.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** The plan must provide for additional precautions for those who are at high risk of serious illness if they are infected, such as pregnant women and people with chronic illnesses, compromised immune systems, or disabilities, and people whose housing placements restrict their access to medical care and limit the staff's ability to observe them.
- **Data collection:** The collection of data regarding COVID-19 will be part of the public health response. As with any contagious disease, data collection is critical to understanding and fighting the virus. The prison system must be part of this process. The same information that is tracked in the community must be tracked in the prisons.

Please let us know by close of business on Tuesday, March 17 when you will be available to discuss your plans with us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "SK Rossi". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and "K" followed by "Rossi".

SK Rossi
Director of Advocacy and Policy
ACLU of Montana
rossis@aclumontana.org

