



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **COVID-19 Retesting at South Mississippi prison; Mississippi among safest prisons**

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**JACKSON, MS** – As Mississippi health officials acquire more COVID-19 test kits with cases rising dramatically in the general population, the Mississippi Department of Corrections is joining forces with the Mississippi Department of Health to aggressively ramp up COVID-19 testing. MDOC is further redoubling sanitization efforts.

Starting with testing the day before Thanksgiving, MDOC administered Rapid Antigen tests to 505 inmates at South Mississippi Correctional Institution near Leakesville, of which 179 tested positive. Five days later, MSDH retested inmates in the same SMCI sector, identifying 139 more positive cases. Health officials say all 318 inmates were asymptomatic, with only one hospitalized for observation. Another 41 over several day tested positive, all asymptomatic.

The 14-day CDC-mandated quarantine for the recovered 188 inmates ended December 9, 2020. Quarantine for the remaining 162 will be lifted next week. Adhering to official guidelines, prison officials are returning recovered inmates to their former units in phases.

SMCI Superintendent Andrew Mills said an investigation revealed that the virus entered Delta-1 unit by an inmate coming from the prison infirmary. “But it spread,” Mills said, “from an infirmary worker, from maintenance personnel, canteen workers, and a couple of corrections officers who showed no symptoms. It is hard to battle something you cannot see.”

“As we’ve been reiterating for months,” said MDOC Commissioner Burl Cain, “we are doing everything possible to keep our inmate population and officers safe. We are taking 14 comprehensive and aggressive steps:

1. We are using electrostatic sanitizing sprayers to spray down all surfaces in all buildings, cellblocks, kitchens and dining areas;
2. We’re installing hospital-type industrial ultraviolet sterilization lights;
3. We’re using portable UV sterilizers and hand wand UV sterilizers;
4. We’re installing air purifiers;
5. We have purchased and are installing walk-through sanitization stations that mist inmates and staff with a 75 percent alcohol solution per CDC guidelines;
6. We are keeping inmate movement to absolute minimum;
7. We have delayed family visitations until we get official clearance from the CDC and Mississippi Department of Health;
8. We are replacing uniforms, bedding, pillow cases, and mattresses as needed;
9. We have purchased and distributed 60,000 reusable masks to add to the 250,000 donated single-use paper masks;
10. We are enforcing hand sanitizing;
11. We are enforcing social distancing;
12. We are enforcing masks;
13. We are requiring every corrections officer, administration staffer, medical worker, maintenance crewperson, canteen worker, and vendor to screen for temperature and symptoms every time they enter the prison; and,
14. COVID-19 is another reason we have been trying to re-open some prisons to allow for more distancing. However, we are having a difficult time in striking a balance between MDOC’s years-long workforce attrition and creating space for quarantine for prisoners who test positive. We are struggling to rebuild our staff.”

Mississippi prisons remain among the safest in the nation from the COVID-19 virus. According to data collected by New York’s Marshall Project, a prisoner rights advocacy group, by December 10, 2020, Mississippi was well among the top third safest prisons in America for COVID and becoming safer. The Marshall data showed Mississippi dropping in rankings for COVID cases from 31<sup>st</sup> to 43<sup>rd</sup> out of the 50 states in five weeks. The federal prison system of 154,000 inmates moved to first place in that time as the most unsafe for COVID cases, followed by Texas. The U.S. Bureau of Prisons is reporting 30,312 inmate COVID cases while Texas is reporting 26,807. Mississippi is reporting 902 inmate COVID cases.

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