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No Outbreak of COVID-19 in Mississippi prisons; among safest prisons in U.S.

JACKSON, MS – Recent mismatches of medical data between state agencies regarding COVID-19 cases at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County caused erroneous reports this week of an “outbreak” among state prisoners at CMCF. State Epidemiologist Dr. Paul Byers describes a COVID-19 outbreak as three or more positive tests in a 14-day period among people in a confined group working or living closely together in the same area.

In the last two days of September 2020, three inmates from CMCF tested positive but only one tested positive at the facility. The other two tested COVID-19 positive during lengthy stays at Merit Health Medical Center. The three lived among nearly 3,000 inmates at CMCF but were never housed in close proximity to each other nor did their infections affect the population.

Dr. Byers explained, “The Mississippi State Department of Health has been working with the Department of Corrections to establish the most recent COVID case information. After a thorough review of the data, we can safely conclude there is not an outbreak at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility.”

According to recent statistics compiled by the Marshall Project, a New York-based prisoner rights news organization, Mississippi has among the lowest rates of COVID-19 cases among prisoners in the nation. Just over 800 Mississippi prisoners have tested positive, or about 4.6 percent of the state’s 17,200 prisoners. The Marshall data, compiled in partnership with the Associated Press using numbers from corrections departments in every state, reveals that Mississippi ranks 31st in prisoner COVID-19 cases behind 30 other states plus the entire federal incarceration system. In addition, Mississippi ranks 29th in prisoner COVID-19 infection rates, according to the report.

As of late October, Texas leads the nation with 23,283 COVID-19 cases for an infection rate of about 2,000 cases per 10,000 prisoners, according to Marshall. Approximately 15.5% of Texas' 150,000 inmates have tested positive. By comparison, Mississippi has 804 COVID-19 cases, or 511 cases per 10,000 prisoners, one-fourth that of Texas. Neighboring state Tennessee's inmate COVID-19 rate is six times that of Mississippi (TN: 2,916/10,000) while Louisiana has three times Mississippi's infection rate (LA: 1,680 cases per 10,000).

The second highest rate of prisoner COVID-19 cases in the Marshall data is in federal prisons. Over 17,000 federal inmates across 110 prisons have tested positive for the virus, or about 1,200 per 10,000.

“Our numbers compared to the rest of the nation show we are doing the right things in our prisons,” said MDOC Commissioner Burl Cain. “The quarantine has been very hard to maintain but it has paid off. With no visitors from the outside, inmates only interact with corrections officers who are tested for temperature and physical wellbeing every single time they show up for work. If anyone is the least questionable about whether they might be sick, we tell them to stay home. We are constantly sanitizing facilities, supplying masks, and social distancing as we can. We will soon have enough COVID-19 tests to immediately check every inmate who exhibits any signs of sickness. Ranking in the top half of safest prisons against COVID-19 out of all 7,000 incarceration facilities across the nation is proof we are doing everything we can at MDOC to protect inmates.”

MDOC daily posts COVID-19 case numbers on the MDOC website.

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