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More COVID-19 Testing Planned at South Mississippi Correctional Institution

JACKSON, MS – In an abundance of caution as Coronavirus cases go up nationwide, the Mississippi Department of Corrections is ramping up COVID-19 testing, calling in the Mississippi State Department of Health after 17 inmates tested positive the last two weeks at South Mississippi Correctional Institution in Leakesville. MDOC and MSDH will conduct double testing, once this week and again next week to ensure containment of the virus.

Of the 17 housed in three separate units at SMCI, healthcare officials at the prison say most show no symptoms, with only one hospitalized because of a heart condition. However, because 500 inmates comprise the total population of those units, MDOC will rapid test all 500 Wednesday, November 25, with MSDH testing again next week. Those testing positive will be moved to a separate quarantine unit. Currently, SMCI has 900 available beds.

“We are doing everything humanly possible to ensure the safety of inmates and corrections officers,” said Corrections Commissioner Burl Cain. “We are using state-of-the-art electrostatic sanitizing sprayers every day in every unit to keep all viruses and bacteria down. We’ve purchased industrial Ultra-violet sterilization lights like those used in hospitals, portable UV sterilizers, hand wand UV sterilizers, air purifiers, and whole sanitization stations that lightly mist as staff and inmates walk through the unit. Where needed, we are replacing uniforms, bedding, pillow cases, and mattresses. We’ve bought 60,000 reusable masks in addition to paper masks. We enforce hand sanitizing, social distancing, masks, and require every corrections officer, administration staffer, and vendor to screen every time they enter the prison. The fact that the virus still gets through all these stringent measures shows how contagious COVID-19 is.”

Dr. Raman Singh, medical director with MDOC healthcare provider VitalCore, added, “The testing is necessary to comply with CDC guidelines in protecting those who have to be in close quarters. The good news is nearly all who are testing positive are asymptomatic. They don’t have fever, pain, chills, no symptoms. Only one has been hospitalized because of a heart condition. But we have to make every effort to keep all the inmates and staffers safe.”

Commissioner Cain said MDOC and MSDH have increased monitoring inmate health at Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) at Parchman, Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) in Pearl, and SMCI since the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as at all regionals and private facilities. Mississippi Corrections currently maintains a total of 17,160 inmates.

“We haven’t had visitation since March,” said Commissioner Cain, “so the virus could only come in through people, which we screen, or contraband which we can’t. That’s the only two ways an outbreak could happen. Rule breakers and gang leaders put everybody else at risk. As long as smuggling cellphones, marijuana, tobacco, alcohol, and other substances continues, gangs could infect everybody around them. That’s why we are also stepping up shakedowns and seizing contraband. We are going to win this battle against both COVID-19 and the gangs.”

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