

TRCI: Many blame prison staff for bringing the virus in

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not have current active cases.

In all, 2,690 adults in custody and 679 staff have reportedly tested positive in Oregon, and 26 inmates who contracted COVID-19 have died, according to the ODOC.

"It seems like the (department of corrections) is just really reactive," Tara Herivel, a Portland-based attorney with more than 20 clients at TRCI, said. "They wait until the problem has taken over, no matter how predictable it is or not. Then when pressures are hard enough, they take action, whether adequate or not. They wait in a reactive kind of position, and it is just fatal in these circumstances."

Some inmates at TRCI say they believe infection is stemming from prison workplaces, like the laundry unit or kitchen, where they say inmates from quarantined units are mixing with those who aren't quarantined.

"Don't get me wrong, I like my job, I like working," said Troy Marin, an inmate at TRCI who works in the laundry unit. "But I don't want my life being in jeopardy either."

Inmates say that if they refuse to go to work, they will face retaliation by being placed in "the hole" — a segregated unit where inmates are sent when they misbehave.

Officials from the ODOC said, "It is impossible to definitively say what may have caused or exacerbated the outbreak at TRCI." They said that health and safety measures like sanitization, mask wearing and social distancing are taking place to their "best ability."

In response to a list of questions from the *EO* newsroom, the officials said, "ODOC cannot comment on specific allegations as they are subject to pending litigation in several cases."

However, prison officials pointed out that earlier this week, a two-day trial before the Umatilla County Circuit Court regarding similar allegations resulted in a judge ruling the state "has not been deliberately indifferent to the COVID-19 conditions at TRCI, and that on the contrary, ODOC has invested significant resources and energy into fighting and preventing the spread of COVID-19 within the institution."



East Oregonian, File

Between Dec. 10 and Dec. 18, 2020, 47 additional inmates and six staff at Two Rivers Correctional Institution tested positive for COVID-19.

When it began

On Dec. 10, after two prison staff tested positive a week before, corrections staff transferred 10 COVID-19-positive inmates from Deer Ridge Correctional Institution in Madras to the medical isolation unit at Two Rivers, as first reported by Oregon Public Broadcasting. At the time of the transfer, Deer Ridge had more than 130

from a Tier-4 prison to another prison, and those people haven't been tested but it turns out they're positive, you are opening up a whole bunch of people to pain, suffering and possibly death," Herivel said.

Officials said in the email that they were following transfer protocol.

On Dec. 16, a power outage caused by two wires

ered causing trouble and getting himself put into "the hole" just to be in a cell with light. "You can't read or you can't do anything. You're just laying there. Our cells aren't big enough for two people to get up and move around at the same time."

The 64-year-old Roof, a Type-2 diabetic, said inmates around him were receiving frozen, rancid meat, and

in Washington, D.C., at the Rainey Center, and has a client at TRCI, said she believes the power outage exacerbated the COVID-19 outbreak. Her client, Craig Dawson, filed a claim against TRCI's former superintendent, Tyler Blewett, claiming the prison does not follow guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Blewett resigned as super-

"THERE'S NO REASON FOR THEM TO BE TREATED LIKE THAT. THEY'RE NOT ANIMALS. ONE OF THEM IS MY SON."

— Cheryl Baker, mother of TRCI inmate Brandon Baker

adults in custody with active cases.

Between Dec. 10 and Dec. 18, 2020, 47 additional inmates and six staff at TRCI tested positive.

Herivel said there are department of corrections policies against transferring inmates in and out of Tier-4 prisons — the highest level of quarantine based on cases at an individual prison. She said she believes the transfers are done when prisons run out of space for medical treatment and the institution is overcome by the spread of disease, "and this appears to have happened at TRCI," she said.

"If you transfer people

shorting and exploding in a conduit underground after 20 years of degradation left an area where more than 600 inmates reside in the pitch black, according to officials and sources. Several days later, inmates were provided small, battery-powered lights to illuminate their cells, just as infection was ramping up in the prison.

For more than a week, inmates were released from their cells for about an hour a day to use the phone and shower. Aside from that — darkness.

"It's weird, because you lose your sense of what's going on," said Frank Roof, an inmate, who added he consid-

their diet mostly consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cookies and some fruit. Finally, a few days after the outage, they began to receive warm food in the form of a 3-ounce scoop of oatmeal, he said. Roof said the meals and inability to leave his cell left his blood sugar "out of control."

Roof added that conditions during the power outage caused tensions to rise. Officers told him fights were breaking out and two staff had been assaulted due to the anger caused by the power outage, Roof said in December.

Meghan Bishop, an Oregon attorney who works

intendent of the prison on Dec. 15, 2020, after serving in the position for a year. The prison declined to provide any information about why Blewett resigned.

'There's no reason for them to be treated like that'

Bishop said her client has told her the movement of inmates to the showers and phone was disorganized and crowded, making it easier for the virus to spread. And when Dawson emailed her about correctional officers not wearing personal protective equipment while doing cell searches, he was put in "the hole," she said.

Bishop said Dawson is medically vulnerable to COVID-19 due to multiple heart attacks, lung damage from pneumonia and high blood pressure. She said he told her he got food poisoning from eating expired foods during the outbreak.

"What is going on in prisons across the state is a result of choices," she said. "The prison system chose not to implement CDC guidelines. They chose to not come down hard on (correctional officers) for not wearing masks. They chose not to implement mass testing."

Bishop said the way prisons around Oregon are handling the outbreak could have long-standing effects.

"By not treating people who are incarcerated with dignity, by feeding them expired food, by locking them up 23 hours a day, by retaliating against them because they are seeing injustices within the prison walls, we are setting them up for failure once they're released," she said. "And what we're seeing with (prisons in Oregon) due to COVID is people are now seeing the reality of what incarceration is. This has been going on for decades."

Sources in nearly every interview with the *East Oregonian* said they blame prison staff for bringing the virus into TRCI, emphasizing the fact that it is impossible for inmates to go out and bring the virus in.

Prison officials said "all people entering a DOC institution are screened for COVID-19," adding staff take employees' temperatures and ask about symptoms relating to the coronavirus.

"DOC has brought institution outbreaks under control at other prisons and we will do it again thanks to the hard work and diligence of employees and AICs," the officials said.

Friends and families of inmates are doubtful, dismayed, and are calling on the prison to implement stricter guidelines to keep their loved ones safe.

"I'm angry. I'm past concerned. I'm angry," said Cheryl Baker, Brandon Baker's mother, who said she hadn't seen her son in person for nearly a year due to the virus. "There's no reason for them to be treated like that. They're not animals. One of them is my son."

Insurrection: Greater Hermiston Republican Women declined comment

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around the doors. Lockwood and others looking down on the scene from above had not been able to be evacuated at the same time as lawmakers on the floor, but eventually they were evacuated as well.

Knowing that some protesters were caught on film physically assaulting members of the media in the past year, including in videos of the Jan. 6 protest that later emerged, Lockwood said he was concerned for his safety if protesters breached the undisclosed location they were evacuated to.

"I took off my tie. I took off my suit jacket. I tucked away my press IDs, I figured I would be more likely to blend in that way," he said.

He said he was grateful for many he encountered during the experience, including the Capitol Police and congressional staffers who led people to safety, and a lawmaker who offered him a spare COVID-19 mask when he realized he had lost his while donning one of the gas masks everyone was instructed to pull from under their seat in the chamber.

When the building was eventually cleared and Congress returned to work, Lockwood did too. When he finished covering the certification of the election results and left, it was 3:45 a.m. on Thursday, Jan. 7, and he realized, due to the curfew imposed by the mayor, that it wasn't possible for him to catch a taxi or Uber. So he waited until the subway reopened and returned home after 6 a.m. to be greeted by his very concerned dog.



Jose Luis Magana/Associated Press

Supporters of President Donald Trump climb the west wall of the the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington.

Lockwood got his first interest in politics as a 13-year-old in Hermiston, when he had a long conversation with prominent Hermiston resident

stories for the *East Oregonian* during his high school years for his first taste of journalism.

"I helped cover the game when Hermiston beat Pend-

attendance at inaugurations, State of the Union addresses, and an interview with President Donald Trump in the Oval Office. Second only to

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— Frank E. Lockwood, correspondent for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

Joe Burns about the results of the 1980 election when Ronald Reagan beat incumbent Jimmy Carter for the presidency. His father, Frank Lockwood Sr., is a former *Hermiston Herald* reporter, and Lockwood Jr. wrote sports

leton (at football) for the first time in living memory," he said.

Since graduating and leaving Hermiston, he said his experiences as a journalist in Washington, D.C., have often felt surreal, including

his experience being in D.C. on Sept. 11, 2001, however, he said Jan. 6, 2021, will always be a particularly memorable day.

Local reaction

Watching the news from

his home in Pendleton, Mark Petersen, the chair of the Umatilla County Democratic Party, recalled watching stagings of the French Revolution on TV, but this time the setting was more familiar.

"They weren't soldiers," he said. "They were Americans."

The Greater Hermiston Republican Women organized a small "Stop the Steal" rally in Pendleton on Jan. 6, but the group declined to comment via Facebook Messenger.

"I have no say on the events that occurred in Washington," a member wrote. "I wasn't there. Thank you for the opportunity God Bless."

The mother of Suni Danforth, the chair of the Umatilla County Republican Party, answered her home phone and said Danforth was out of the area and wouldn't be available until Monday, Jan. 11.

After the breach ended, some conservatives spread a baseless conspiracy theory that left-wing agitators had posed as pro-Trump protesters to initiate the riot and smear the president.

Another common argument was that liberals and the media were overly focused on the breach, while playing down the violence and property destruction in Portland and other major cities during Black Lives Matter protests.

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, brought up Portland when a reporter from *The Oregonian* asked him if he was surprised about the breach.

"(I'd) point out the failure of those in Portland to appropriately manage the 100

days of burnings and riots and property destruction that probably convinced a lot of people that law enforcement didn't exist anymore in big cities and encouraged this kind of activity," he said in the Jan. 6 interview.

According to *The Oregonian*, Bentz would go on to join a failed attempt to throw out the votes from Pennsylvania, although he later acknowledged Biden as the president-elect.

Pendleton activist Briana Spencer asserted the Black Lives Matter protests and Capitol breach were incomparable. She referred to a statistic from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project that showed that more than 93% of Black Lives Matter protests were peaceful, while the Jan. 6 events involved armed mobs forcing their way into a government building.

"The BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) community was not surprised by this," she said.

Spencer noted the vast disparity in how many people were arrested in the breach in comparison to the Black Lives Matter protests, with some police even posing for pictures with members of the mob.

She added that she didn't advocate for a more violent response from police in the Capitol breach, just a less violent approach when police deal with people of color.

Petersen said Bentz and Trump were complicit in inciting the riot, but he didn't know how the country would come together after this.

"I don't have any answers," he said.