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Carty and Barraza: The Hidden Victims of Covid-19

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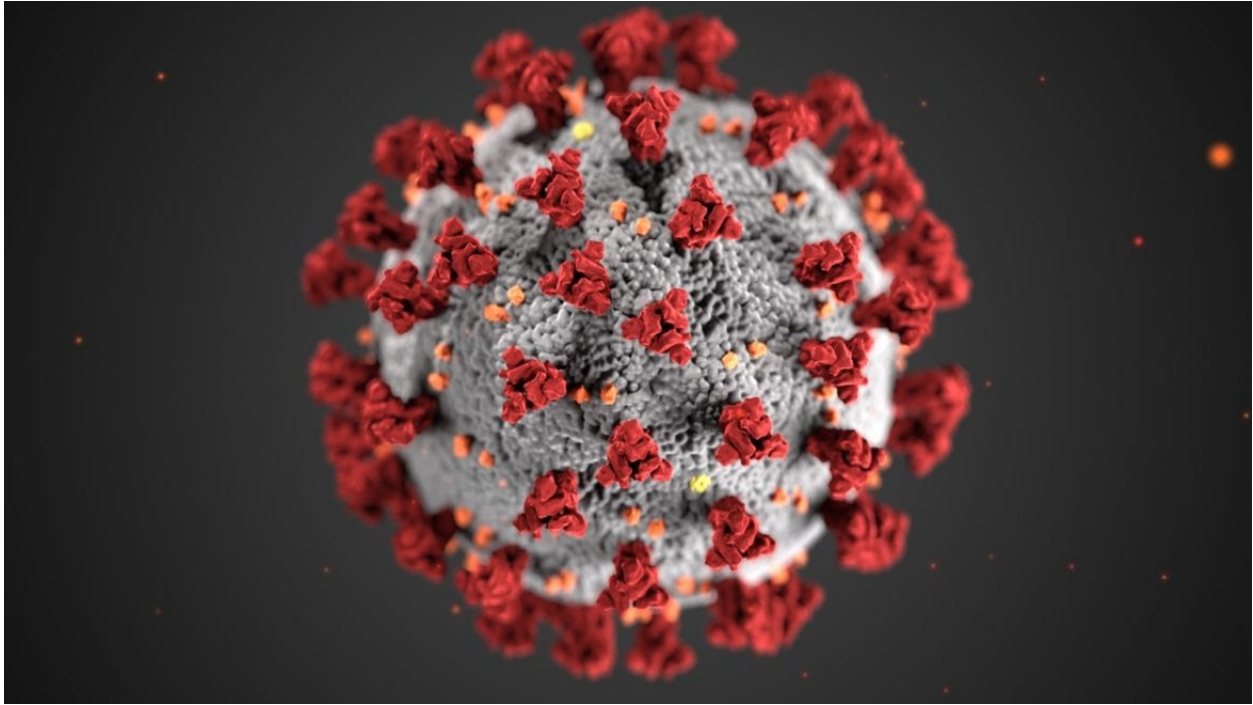
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CDC image by Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins

An image illustration of the coronavirus, known as COVID-19, provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

By Victoria Carty and Greg Barraza May 22, 2020

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At the Chino Institute for Men (CIM) state prison, notorious for overcrowding conditions, the local authorities are moving toward an illogical pivot from “containment” to “encounter” in dealing with the health of both prisoners and staff in terms of the looming threat that Covid-19 poses. Soon, CIM officials intend to transfer inmates who have been living among other inmates who have tested positive for the virus into one of the dormitories where everyone thus far has tested negative and had been quarantined for two weeks. On May 10th the facility halted the movement of all prisoners to isolate those infected and control the virus and impede cross-contamination. They plan to reverse this course of action which puts lives at risk.

Many inmates feel this is intentional in an effort “to try to kill them off” and they are, not surprising, terrified. Everyday prisoners witness ambulances, or what is referred to as an “escort van” take away the very sick and deceased. As of May 16, there were 431 confirmed cases of infection and 5 deaths at CIM according to reporting from the Sacramento Bee. This number continues to rise, and if the proposed actions of the administration move forward, the number has the potential to skyrocket beyond containment.

Prisons, jails and immigration detentions centers (in addition to nursing homes) are well known to be incubators for the spread of the virus as it is not possible to maintain social distancing, and in many cases, there is an inadequate supply of hygiene products. According to the Vera Institute for Justice, as of May 17 there were over 21,000 cases in Federal and State prisons and deaths exceeding 300. Information released one day later from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has more staggering data. According to its website, CIM has 439 confirmed cases within its inmate population, or 72% of the confirmed cases in CDCR are housed at CIM. In addition, CIM has 52 confirmed cases among its staff.

Across the country some prisoners are quarantined to an extent resembling solitary confinement if they test positive for health reasons. Although solitary confinement is not the most ideal situation, it is a viable option in order to minimize the spread of the virus. However, using solitary confinement as a punishment for inmates’ concerns for their health seems to border on violating the 8th Amendment of the Constitution. For example, inmates I have spoken with at CIM are threatened with lockdown for asking questions and pleading for more information as to why they are going to be mixed with others prisoners who are known to have been sharing dorms with known cases of inmates who have had the virus. The lack of communication is as distressful as the threat of falling ill. In a meeting with inmates the Captain justified this move by telling them that it is their own fault that they are incarcerated, and the facility is not responsible for their health; this seems contrary to the purported rehabilitation efforts of the facility.

This is a broader public health concern for us all as correctional officers and other staff working at the facility cannot social distance safely, and at the end of their shift return to their families and communities. Many have indeed become ill (see above data) and thus are calling in sick to work, which has led to staff shortages and complications with the logistics of running the CIM.

The inmates at CIM are mobilizing as best they can to get better information and to ensure their safety. They are not asking to be released from prison, they are requesting that they be treated like human beings, who do, even if facing a life sentence, have rights to health and safety. Frankly, some inmates are more distressed about facing a life sentence imposed on them by COVID-19; they will have unjustly been given a potentially death sentence. Even though some face the possibility of spending the rest of their life incarcerated due to their adjudication, it is inhumane to impose a decision that may lead to an unintentional, yet intentional, death sentence.

Family members are holding a rally on May 23 at 11:00 am at 14225 Central Ave in Chino by conducting a “drive by” rally in support of the health rights for prisoners and to encourage the CDRC and state legislators to reconsider their agenda to end the policy of mixing prisoners from different buildings for no apparent reason.



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