

# Inmate infection a community concern

By Jennifer Johnson  
Managing Editor

With a COVID-19 outbreak in local prisons that house thousands in Southeast Texas, inmate infection and consequential admission to local hospitals are taking a toll on the already overburdened health care system. Still, with more and more confirmed cases behind bars spilling over into the community where these institutions are nestled, those inside the walls are fighting little is being done to stop the spread.

Dr. Qamar Arfeen, MD, FCCP, Baptist Beaumont Hospital COVID Unit Lead Intensivist, said he has noticed a dramatic uptick in inmates being cared for in Southeast Texas hospitals.

“We do have a significant number of inmates in all our hospitals,” Arfeen explained, a trend that only seems to be climbing upward. “Hospitals overburdened with inmates is a big crisis – and it’s going to get worse.”

Of the 86 baseline ICU beds available in Southeast Texas, 86 were in use as of July 8, with critical patient overflow being cared for in extra capacity beds and the Emergency Room.

“We have passed the max. We are in overflow mode. That is a concern,” Arfeen explained of patients continuing to be admitted while capacity is already “maxed out.” “We have no beds and no plasma, and we’re about to run out of medicine. The bigger issue, when we have an inmate and they end up in the emergency room on the ventilator, is there’s no transfer. If we’re full, we’re full. All the hospitals are full in a 100-mile radius. The next few weeks are going to be super critical. Hopefully, we’re not about to run into a major issue.”

“We’re already at max capacity and we do not have a plan of how we’re going to handle it.”



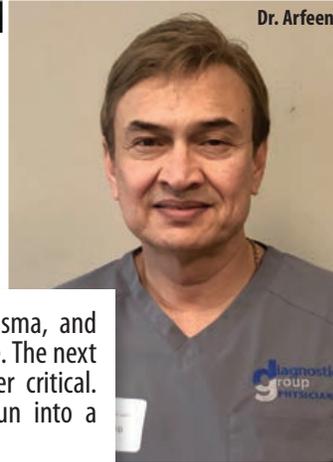
## Federal prison

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), which operates a prison complex on the edge of Beaumont that houses 4,420 men in a camp, low, medium and maximum facilities on site, also employs approximately 804 staff members who have direct contact with the prisoners, according to a 2018 Prison Rape Elimination Audit report dated June 2018.

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*– Dr. Qamar Arfeen, MD, FCCP, Baptist Beaumont Hospital COVID Unit Lead Intensivist*

As of July 6, BOP had 1,992 federal inmates and 160 BOP confirmed positive for COVID-19 nationwide, with 94 federal inmate deaths and one BOP staff member death attributed to COVID-19



disease. July 7, inmates diagnosed with COVID had ballooned to 7,391. More than 4,500 tests were pending while the BOP confirmed active

cases in 93 facilities and 37 release centers.

In Beaumont area facilities alone, the BOP-reported 44 positive cases at the low-security facility on July 6 jumped overnight to 80 inmate and one staff

positive; the medium facility reporting two inmate positives and six staff positives; the maximum facility reporting zero inmate infections and three staff infections.

Those living in the compound, however, report that the numbers are much higher – and destined to rise even more.

“These numbers make it seem like they’re testing people,” a prisoner at the low-security prison facility told The Examiner. Talking on a contraband phone about the inner workings of a prison where he’s scheduled to remain in custody, the prisoner to be referred to in print as “James” explained what precautions are – and are not – being taken to stem the spread of the coronavirus from inside the prison.

“Every two days they come around and take our temperature,” James said, “but they’re real short staffed so nothing is really done too regularly.”

In James’ “dorm,” there are 144 inmates that use the same (single) water fountain, restrooms and showers, phones and common areas.

“They’re not sanitized; they’re not sanitary,” he said of the common use areas, the restrooms being particularly nasty due to reduced staff on hand to properly clean the high-traffic domain.

“We all use the same email, same phones. They’re giving you a mask and telling you to wash it out by hand or put them in with everyone else’s to be washed and hopefully you can pick yours out when they come back around with them. They don’t give us any chemicals to clean anything, and there’s guys around here just coughing and sneezing everywhere.”

Admitting any signs of possible infection, according to James, gets inmates sent to isolation with no TV and no phones – so few men ask to be tested if they can help it.

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**INMATE**

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“In my part that I’m in, no one has been tested,” James said. “They ask you, ‘Do you have any symptoms?’ But who’s going to admit to it? No TV, no phone, no nothing. You’ll be put in a whole ‘nother building, 14-15 days in there with no access to your loved ones or anything. Nobody wants that.”

Rebecca Tafoya from Ventura County, California has a son serving one more year of a six-year sentence at the BOP low-security facility in Beaumont. She’s scared for her child, and unable to reach him on the inside.

“I call, but the prison doesn’t give me any information,” she said. “It’s starting to spread in there and I’m not getting any answers to what they’re doing. I hear horror stories where everyone who is getting sick, they are thrown into a unit. They’re just coughing all over each other, and there isn’t hardly any medical care.”

As James agreed, access to a (legal) phone is about as scarce as access to a hot meal – virtual unicorns in a land of little.

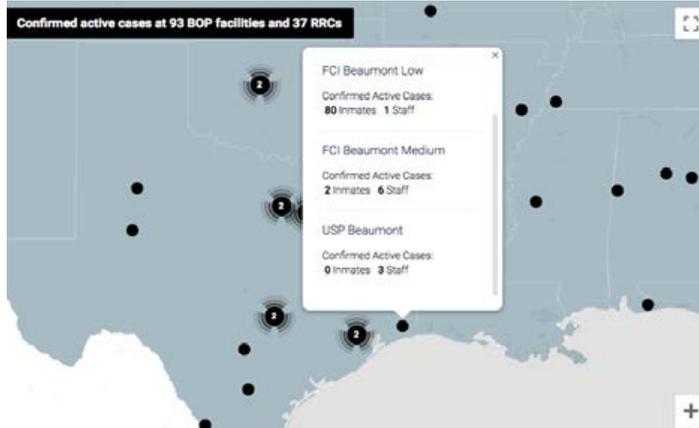
“They have them locked up twenty-something hours a day so he can only call like once a month. When I spoke to him a month ago, only one person had COVID.”

Tafoya believes inmates with only a small amount of time left to serve on their sentences, such as her son, would be better served on house arrest. Communities reeling from the inmate population boom of COVID-19 infection would fare better, too, she also ventures to guess.

“Where is the humanity? It could be a life or death situation for some people,” she said. “I just want to know my son is OK. I want to know what do they do when someone gets a diagnosis.”

“I want him to come home – even on house arrest – at least he’d be safe from this pandemic ... as safe as possible, anyway.”

“We are deeply concerned for the health and welfare of inmates who are entrusted to our care, and for our staff, their families and the communities we live and work in,” BOP Public Affairs Officer Justin Long reported to The Examiner in response to a query. “It is our highest priority to continue to do everything we can to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our facilities.”



**Across multiple facilities in Texas, several have instances of COVID-19 in both inmates and staff**

According to Long, “In response to COVID-19, the BOP has instituted a comprehensive management approach that includes screening, testing, appropriate treatment, prevention, education and infection control measures. The BOP has been coordinating our COVID-19 efforts since January 2020, using subject-matter experts both internal and external to the agency, including guidance and directives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Office of the Vice President.”

Long said that the first phases of the BOP nationwide action plan were essential to slowing the spread of the virus. “These actions included establishing a task force to begin strategic planning and building on our already existing procedures for managing pandemics. We started limiting facility-to-facility transfers, and other inmate movement, as well as implementing screening, quarantine and isolation procedures.”

Visitation was suspended, staff training and travel was canceled, limited access was enacted for contractors and volunteers, meals were moved from a large arena to the confinement of cells, movement was reduced and markers were placed on the floor to denote six feet spacing. Enhanced testing and temperature checks have also been enacted, according to Long, and, “as much as possible,” staff is being assigned to the same posts and not rotating as an additional measure to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Long said inmates do have access to cleaning materials and hand soap – even indigent inmates who can’t purchase the luxury. “Additionally,” he said, “inmates are provided facial coverings and staff at FCC Beaumont make routine inmate symptom and temperature checks. All staff at FCC Beaumont also undergo health screening and temperature checks prior to reporting to work.”

“The amount of inmates affected with COVID is larger than anyone else,” Dr. Arfeen said, urging adherence to CDC recommendations to stem the spread of COVID-19 that include social distancing of 6 feet or more, wearing a face covering when unable to social distance, disinfecting objects and washing hands frequently and thoroughly. “In prison, the reason they experience so much is because they are in a confined space. That’s why they have a lot of COVID cases.”

“While it’s true that only a small portion of people get sick and end up in the hospital, there are only 86 regular ICU beds in this area. If we’re not careful, 500 beds won’t be enough.”

**TDCJ state jails**

As of July 1, there were 117,765 offenders and 35,662 employees tested for COVID-19 through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Of those tested, 8,811 offenders and 1,556 staff tested positive for COVID-19 in both symptomatic and asymptomatic testing. There had been 84 offender deaths connected to COVID-19 with an additional 28 under investigation, and eight employee deaths from

COVID-19.

July 6, TDCJ reported the loss of yet another employee connected to the COVID-19 virus, 60-year-old correctional officer Kenneth Harbin.

“Every death of one of our own is a tragic loss,” said TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier. “The thoughts and prayers of his ‘family in gray’ are with Officer Harbin’s loved ones and friends. He will not be forgotten.”

Official TDCJ information won’t address specific COVID case numbers by individual prisons, but Southeast Texas is home to three. The LeBlanc Unit has the capacity to house 1,224 adult male offenders. The facility is located on 776 acres that are shared with two other state jails – Stiles, with a capacity of 2,981, and Gist, which housed 1,841 as of June 16.

In just the LeBlanc Unit, one staffer reported on condition of anonymity, hundreds of inmates have tested positive for COVID-19.

“We had a transfer in from a prison around Huntsville that have it,” the employee explained. “That’s when it started on our unit. They shipped him to Galveston at UTMB. Three days later, our count was up to 19. Then it got up to 50-something. Two weeks ago or so, it was right at 200 people in that small unit that tested positive for the coronavirus.”

“They shipped some out. They’re steady moving them – even right now. You’re spreading it all over the place from one unit to another.”

According to the industry insider, the Stiles Unit is home to over 600 inmates and 30 staffers positive for coronavirus.

“Worse than that, they take it home to their family,” they said. “And it’s going to spread like wildfire right back out into the community. We are just a number to them. Period. They think people are stupid.”

TDCJ inmate Ted Berry, convicted in Beaumont and sent upstate to do his time, said conditions throughout the state jail system are similarly situated.

“We have been locked down for approximately 60 days now,” Berry wrote to the newspaper on June 2. “We get five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches a day, divided by three meals. We get 1 tablespoon of bleach for sanitation every 10 days. They record, when they decide to record, your skin temperature, not your body temperature. Mine has not been over 93.1 as of yet.”

The inmate said that jail staff frequently operate without face coverings



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and those issued to inmates are subpar at best.

“There is no such thing as social distancing,” he said. “Their main combatant to the virus seems to be to just lock us in our cells.

“I think most all of us, including myself, are extremely concerned about the virus, especially now since they’re having daily spikes in Texas. We feel almost helpless as we have absolutely no control over policies or procedures.

“They lock us down for two months, then they finally test the whole unit one Saturday morning. Before the results are back, they have everyone mingle and then lock us down again. The pandemic has pierced the walls, and personnel is totally incompetent to handle it. The guards have been so overworked by having to do all the work that has not been done by inmates that they don’t even care anymore.”

The mediocre amount of sanitizing that does get done, he said, does little to make inmates feel any safer.

“It is perfectly fine for them with 84 persons in the dayroom and require, at the threat of disciplinary action, that they be seated right next to each other or go to the chow hall and touch hand railings, tables and pitchers where upwards of 1,000 men have touched,” he confided. “They spray the handles to building doors with diluted bleach approximately once a week. I’m sure this procedure is safe for about 15 minutes.”

“They’re supposed to give them at least one hot meal a day,” the anonymous LeBlanc staffer said. “They’re giving them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and stuff I wouldn’t feed my dog. It is inhumane. It is not right. It is causing all kinds of big fights in there. And, the coronavirus spread is just getting more and more out of control.

“It’s such a messed up thing. It isn’t right.”

**Jefferson County Jail**

“For my inmates, it’s frightening because they don’t get a lot of information; they get a lot of rumors,” Jefferson County Sheriff Zena Stephens told The Examiner. As of July 6, the county jail had tested 159 inmates, resulting in 60 positive COVID-19 cases and several pending results. More than a dozen jailers and staff have also tested positive for the coronavirus. “I fully expect to have more.”

“The more you have, the more difficult it is to contain,” Stephens added, also addressing the conflicting information garnered about the virus that seems to be changing almost daily. “Every day it changes. Is it airborne, or droplets?”

“We’re issuing masks out to inmates and jailers. We’re cleaning constantly. The inmates are cleaning constantly. Everybody’s kind of on lockdown.”

Dozens of inmates and staff are on quarantine, Stephens noted, and for those that remain, “It’s all hands on deck.

“We’re working a lot of overtime. I even have nurses who are quarantined now. We are doing staggered shifts for support staffers, but we are first responders – I get it; we’ve got to keep going.

“It’s been challenging, but we’re doing what we can.”

Stephens said the county jail, like the state and federal prisons, have found it hard to serve hot food to detainees – not from a lack of want or product, but from a lack of being able to prepare and serve the food.

“Due to a shortage in personnel, we’re doing sandwiches at least one meal a day. Maybe even two meals a day.”

A COVID outbreak in the “trustee” prisoner dorm has precluded any assistance there from the model inmates that usually undertake in such endeavors like food prep and regular cleaning.

“There’s very little activity of people moving around,” Stephens said, “and we haven’t had visitation other than their attorneys.

“They are human, too, but what we’re doing right now is as much about their safety as it is ours. For the most part, inmates understand that. They don’t want to be infected either,” but in the meantime there is no access to the law library, no gym, and the medical staff goes to them versus a trip to the infirmary.

“We are all acting on high alert,” Stephens said. “I have to protect my

inmates – and my employees.”

“Everybody knows what to do, it’s just being ignored,” Dr. Arfeen said of a continuing growth of new COVID-19 cases being added daily at prisons and in the “free world.” In Beaumont, triple-digit case counts are becoming common. On Wednesday in Beaumont, there were 92 new diagnoses, bringing a total number of infections to 1,441. In Jefferson County, a total of 2,959 cases were reported as of July 7.

“We’ve got a nursing shortage, a plasma shortage, we’re soon about to run into a shortage of medicine,” Arfeen said. “We may soon be in the worst time we have seen in past 4-5 months.

“I believe we’re just seeing the beginning. There’s a high chance we’ll have five times more sick patients than we have currently in the hospital.”

What happens then?

“Good question,” Arfeen dismissed. “That will be a challenge. All the hospitals in Southeast Texas are doing the best they can with the resources we have. If we have a surge, it will be a disaster.

“The only thing we can do at present is hope and pray we don’t get a lot of critical patients.”

TDCJ’s Public Information Officer referred to the agency’s COVID-19 internet postings for any information to be released. For more information about COVID-19 at the BOP, visit the BOP’s coronavirus resource page at [www.bop.gov/coronavirus/index.jsp](http://www.bop.gov/coronavirus/index.jsp).