

At Pinal jail, coronavirus screening protocols were stepped up months ago

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by inMaricopa - Mar 16, 2020



Pinal County Sheriff's Office and Adult Detention Center

By Bob McGovern

While U.S. health officials say they expect the number of cases of coronavirus to climb dramatically in the coming days, Pinal County officials took steps months ago to prevent an outbreak of the virus at the Adult Detention Center.

To date, there have been no suspected cases at the Florence jail, according to Lauren Reimer, public information officer of the Pinal County Sheriff's Office, which operates the facility.

Wexford Health Sources, the medical services firm contracted by the county to provide inmate health care at the facility, expanded regular flu screening and assessment protocols for early detection of COVID-19 in late December, when coronavirus was first announced. Its staff will continue screening for all respiratory viruses beyond flu season to the end of year, Reimer said.

All Wexford staff at the jail received extra training to help them recognize coronavirus symptoms, including cough, fever and shortness of breath, Reimer said.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. Symptoms can appear 2-14 days after exposure, and it can be fatal, especially in older patients and others with health complications. The source virus is a novel coronavirus first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China.

Any Pinal County Adult Detention Center inmate – there were 546 as of Monday – who shows symptoms of the virus would immediately enter the protocol: donning an N95 respirator for effective filtration of airborne particles and entering a reverse airflow room to prevent spread of contaminated air. Meanwhile, jail officials would contact Pinal County Health Services for assistance with testing, investigating, quarantining and treatment, if necessary, Reimer said.

Wexford, which is paid about \$3.8 million annually to provide medical care at PCADC, according to the county website, has staffers on-site 24-7. (The company also provides medical care at the Pinal County Juvenile Detention Center.)

Jail workers who experience symptoms have been told to stay home and contact their supervisor, Reimer said.

In addition, the sheriff's department has intensified sanitizing efforts in high-traffic areas at the adult jail and is encouraging staff and inmates to follow now-familiar smart hygiene practices, including regular washing of hands, covering of the mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, and keeping living and working areas clean and disinfected, according to Reimer.

Inmates already have limited contact with outsiders. Since mid-2019, in-person visitation with inmates is limited to their attorneys and medical staff. PCADC uses an online video chat application for personal visits.

Procedure has been altered for the fewer than 20 inmates who are on work release, according to Matt Hedrick, PCSO deputy chief. If those inmates show symptoms, they are tested for coronavirus when they leave the jail each day and again when they return.

If it is determined that quarantine is warranted, the sheriff's office will ask the court to determine how to proceed. A work release inmate's sentence could be suspended to provide treatment, for example, Hedrick said.

Managing health issues at the jail is "really not that difficult," he added, citing the ability to shut down the facility as soon as necessary. So far, that has not been necessary for the coronavirus.

Hedrick acknowledged that, so far, other areas of the country have had a more difficult time dealing with the virus.

"For us in Arizona," he said, "it's just how people are reacting (by making big) purchases. Otherwise, we are fine."