

CDCR again shuts down transfers due to statewide virus concerns

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More than three months into the pandemic, the Del Norte County health officer, Dr. Warren Rehwaldt, says he has increased confidence in the ability of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to keep COVID-19 cases out of Pelican Bay State Prison.

But some don't share his optimism.

Del Norte Healthcare District President Dr. Kevin Caldwell has sent three letters asking the state to halt inmate transfers to PBSP, the latest dated June 23.

In that letter Caldwell questions the adequacy of measures taken to quarantine inmates and staff during transfers. He is afraid the spread of the coronavirus in California's prison system could overwhelm the surrounding community.

And in a hearing before the Senate Committee on Public Safety in Sacramento Wednesday, lawmakers focused attention on an escalating outbreak at San Quentin after inmates from the California Institution for Men at Chino were transferred there.

According to a report of the hearing published in the Sacramento Bee, Clark Kelso, the federal receiver overseeing prison health care, said the department relied on negative test results that were several weeks old when it moved 122 inmates to San Quentin. Once they got there and were retested, 25 people came back positive for COVID-19.

Caldwell expressed concern that inmates were subsequently transferred from San Quentin to the California Correctional Center at Susanville, a small remote community in Lassen County that, like Del Norte County, is served by a single hospital.

The transfer of four inmates from San Quentin to Susanville is believed to have resulted in an outbreak at that prison, which the health officer there says may spread into the community and nearby Plumas County.

Since those events, CDCR has stopped most inmate movement and again suspended intake from all county jails through July 29.

At Wednesday's hearing in Sacramento, CDCR Secretary Ralph Diaz defended the department's response throughout the pandemic.

"We have had setbacks such as the San Quentin outbreak but we remain steadfast in our response and dedication to meet the moment to protect our population, staff and the community," he said. "... We can do better, and I know we will do better."

“As a lower-security prison, (CCC) has more inmates doing maintenance, thus pose a greater chance to bring the virus into their situation,” Rehwaldt told The Triplicate. “From my perspective, I’m more worried about an outbreak locally outside of Pelican Bay State Prison, where it would most likely be brought in by a staff member who may not be symptomatic.”

Only two staff members had tested positive for COVID-19 in May, who have since returned to work. There have been no cases among the inmate population, according to CDCR’s patient testing tracker.

The latest information on Del Norte County’s COVID-19 dashboard report shows three active cases with one hospitalized person, 51 total confirmed positive test results and 2,560 tests completed. One case requiring hospitalization has resolved.