

First Pelican Bay inmates, more staff test positive for COVID-19

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The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation confirmed Pelican Bay State Prison has had its first three inmates test positive for COVID-19.

CDCR Spokesperson Terri Hardy told The Triplicate via email the inmate tested positive on Oct. 28, but could not provide additional information in order to protect the individual's medical privacy.

On Monday, Nov. 2, a second inmate and four staff members tested positive for COVID-19. A third inmate tested positive Nov. 3.

According to the CDCR's COVID-19 online tracker at www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/population-status-tracking, as of Nov. 11, the three PBSP inmates bring CDCR's total to 1,038 confirmed COVID-19 case statewide in custody. Another 456 have been confirmed with the coronavirus when released. In total, of the 16,817 total inmates have been confirmed with COVID-19, 15,241 have recovered and 82 have died.

Hardy said Pelican Bay follows CDCR's Patient Movement Matrix when testing for COVID-19.

"This includes housing inmates who have returned from an outside appointment for 14 days in quarantine. While in quarantine, incarcerated people are screened and tested multiple times," Hardy said. "If they test positive, they are placed in isolation and contact tracing is initiated by CDCR nursing staff. If an inmate in quarantine continues to test negative, they are returned to the inmate population after 14 days."

In addition, Hardy said PBSP staff are tested biweekly. According to CDCR's staff COVID-19 tracker, located online at www.cdcr.ca.gov/covid19/cdcr-cchcs-covid-19-status, 52 Pelican Bay staffers have now tested positive for the coronavirus, 42 have returned back to work after self quarantine.

The Del Norte Public Health Department reported 12 total new COVID-19 cases on Monday, Nov. 2, including the six new cases at Pelican Bay State Prison and a 13th on Nov. 3.

None of the new cases required hospitalization according to the Public Health COVID tracking webpage.

Health officials have been coordinating with Pelican Bay and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations to investigate positive cases and place all positives in isolation and notify and quarantine all close contacts.

Del Norte County Health Officer Dr. Warren Rehwaldt told county supervisors at their meeting Nov. 10 his department is making progress on contact tracing PBSP's COVID cases.

"I don't foresee this becoming a big outbreak. The CDCR and CDPH are aware of the situation," Rehwaldt said. "The experience in other prisons including San Quentin have driven the response activity for all the prisons in the system. So I think it is a very different operational picture than it was 3 or 4 months ago."

San Quentin State Prison, California's oldest prison, experienced an outbreak earlier in the summer with 2,200 infections and 28 inmate deaths.

Supervisor Roger Gitlin, who has been following Pelican Bay's fight against the coronavirus, said all three new cases there were transferees.

"I think it is important for the public to know Pelican Bay has and continues to remain safe through extremely strict protocol by Warden (James) Robinson. I'm proud to say of the job he has done keeping that institution COVID free," Gitlin said. "These three were transferees. We've all heard the information that transferees from San Quentin was definitely a problem spot among the COVID and the warden has indicated they expect some increase in healthy population transferred to the other 34 populations around the state."

Rehwaldt clarified one of the confirmed inmate cases was a medical return, thus didn't count as a true transfer. The other two are still being confirmed where they were transferred from.

Supervisor Chris Howard said he was under the impression that transfers from prison to prison had been curtailed.

"When were the state prisons allowed to start transferring prisoners again?" he asked.

His colleague was able to answer that question, saying transfers have been eliminated except for emergency cases. Gitlin added even court cases have been delayed, but not in all cases.

“So there has been limited movement. Not sure the genesis of these three cases where they came from,” Gitlin said. “But there’s no question the amount of movement between all 35 institutions has been severely curtailed. We’ll find out where they came from. I doubt they came from San Quentin and report back to the board.”

Supervisor Lisa Cowan was worried how the inmate positive cases would count toward the overall case number for Del Norte County.

“Had conversations early on that if an inmate became positive, that count would go back to his original county versus ours,” she said. “Are the ones from out of county going to count against us causing us to potentially drop a tier?”

“As I understand it now, and it’s been said over and over again, inmates within the prison system, federal or state prison, do not count toward the county where the prison is situated,” Rehwaldt answered. “So this new total does not affect us. Staff does, unless they reside in Curry County, in which case they count toward Curry.”

As of Nov. 10, the 13 new cases brings Del Norte’s active cases to 14 with zero hospitalizations. Out of 9,578 total tests administered, Del Norte has had 194 total confirmed COVID-19 cases with 180 total recoveries, three hospitalizations and one death.