



“A Message from the Inspector General: Capstone Report on the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” March 2023

Hello, I’m Michael Horowitz, Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Justice.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my office undertook a series of remote inspections of Federal Bureau of Prisons, or BOP, facilities, as well as surveys of staff and inmates, to assess how the pandemic was affecting the safety and security of the federal prisons. We previously released and posted to our website reports and interactive dashboards regarding this work. Today, my office released a capstone report that summarizes our overall findings regarding the BOP’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges it will likely continue to face, and actions it should undertake to prepare for future potential healthcare emergencies. Among our findings were the following:

First, we found that the BOP must improve certain practices for protecting staff and inmate health and safety. We identified particularly serious failures by BOP facilities in their handling of inmates vulnerable to suicide while quarantined due to COVID-19. Numerous facilities housed inmates in single cells during COVID-19 modified operations despite BOP guidance stating that facilities should avoid doing so to the greatest extent possible. Seven inmates died by suicide from March 2020 through April 2021 while housed in single-cell confinement in COVID-19 quarantine units.

Second, we found that the BOP did not fully utilize its home confinement authorities to help address inmate population issues at prisons with COVID-19 outbreaks, and social distancing, quarantine, and staffing challenges.

Third, we found that the BOP should take steps to address staffing shortages and staff morale. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the effects of preexisting staffing shortages, increased staff workloads, and impeded facilities’ ability to fully respond to the pandemic.

Fourth, we found a significant deficiency in the BOP’s communication with inmates’ families regarding inmates’ COVID-19 related serious illnesses, and with its timely notification to crime victims about inmate releases from prisons and transfers to home confinement.

Our report provides a roadmap to the BOP to improve its planning for and response to future public health emergencies. We believe that BOP should implement the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and improve and retain effective practices for protecting staff and inmates. It also should continue to explore ways to safely accommodate inmate access to counsel, mental health care programs and recreation, commissary, and communication methods.

Our report makes several other important findings, which are detailed in our report. To read our report and our 10 recommendations, visit our website oig.justice.gov, or go to oversight.gov.

Thank you for joining me today.

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