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COVID-19

Outbreak leads to prison unit lockdown

Three inmates have tested positive for the coronavirus

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ST. JOHN'S-A unit of 10 inmates at Her Majesty's Penitentiary (HMP) in St. John's is on lockdown for isolation purposes, because three of the inmates have tested positive for COVID-19.

During provincial court proceedings Jan. 31, the court indicated at least two HMP inmates were unable to attend their scheduled appearances by phone due to a COVID-related lockdown on their unit. The province's Department of Justice and Public Safety subsequently confirmed the positive cases to SaltWire Network. All 10 inmates on the unit have been tested for COVID-19, a spokeswoman said in an email.

As of Jan. 4, Newfoundland and Labrador was the only province to have not reported a single case of the coronavirus among inmates in any of its correctional institutions. That changed in the following weeks, when one inmate at the Labrador Correctional Centre contracted COVID19, the spokeswoman said on Jan. 31, adding the individual has since recovered.

"Corrections staff will continue to work with Eastern Health to manage the situation," she wrote. "Appropriate personal protective equipment is provided and being worn."

Other prisons across the country have seen significant outbreaks. University of Ottawa criminology professor Justin Piché, who has been collecting data from across the country related to COVID-19 cases in prisons, indicated Jan. 27 a total of 18,027 prison-related cases of the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic — 13,129 inmates and 4,869 staff. Piché said a third of the cases had been reported in January alone.

The highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus has resulted in a wave of COVID-19 cases across the country, including a significantly increased number in Newfoundland and Labrador since mid-December, leading chief medical officer of health Dr. Janice Fitzgerald to announce a move to Alert Level 4. As of Jan. 31, there have been 40 COVID-19-related deaths in the province; more than half of them have occurred in January.

After avoiding having any COVID-19 cases throughout most of the pandemic, Her Majesty's Penitentiary in St. John's has a unit in lockdown because several inmates recently tested positive. SALTWIRE NETWORK FILE PHOTO

At the start of the month, a Justice Department spokeswoman told SaltWire Network there had been no new COVID-19-related measures implemented in the prison system in light of the province's move to Alert Level 4, because the protocols already in place were proving successful.

"Our approach has worked to date," she said in an email, noting vaccination clinics have been held in each correctional facility, including the administration of boosters to those eligible.

Correctional staff are required to be immunized and were prioritized for boosters. They're also required to wear gloves and masks, and keep up with sanitization in the facilities.

Programming facilitated by visitors to the institutions remains temporarily suspended and inmate movement is being

minimized. New inmates taken into custody are screened by questionnaire.

“Not unlike that recommended to the general public, offenders displaying one symptom of COVID-19 are tested and isolated pending the test results,” the Justice Department spokeswoman said Jan. 4. “Service providers are screened as well (and) no one displaying symptoms is permitted to enter our facilities.

“We are confident everyone who enters our facilities is taking the threat of COVID19 very seriously by using the proper precautions to protect themselves, inmates and correctional staff.”

At the start of the pandemic, the province put a pause on intermittent sentences, granting offenders serving weekend or partialweek time a temporary absence until the COVID-19 situation settled down. In 2021, it released about 65 offenders from across the province — most within 15 to 30 days of the end of their jail sentence — on temporary absences, evaluating their circumstances individually using risk-assessment measures.

In December, inmateadvocacy organizations called on the provincial government to further depopulate the prisons in light of the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus. Elizabeth Fry NL, which advocates for the rights of incarcerated women and gender-diverse individuals, issued an open letter to Premier Andrew Furey, Justice Minister John Hogan and Health Minister Dr. John Haggie, calling for a prioritization of vaccines and boosters for inmates and staff, mandatory rapid tests for frontline staff at the start of each shift and an ample supply of personal protective equipment such as N95

masks, among other things.

“Limiting the spread of COVID-19 in the prisons of Newfoundland and Labrador must not undermine safe conditions of confinement, dignity or timely reintegration. We need to protect the health and lives of persons in prison — because it is what is legally obligated and because it is right,” the organization wrote in the letter.

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