

# Courts release MCDC inmates in wake of COVID-19

By Kelly McKinney  
editor@readthesun.com

The population at the Marion County Detention Center has decreased by more than 70 inmates since March 13, when the Supreme Court of Kentucky mandated courts across the state to review how to decrease populations at county jails due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barry Brady, jailer at the Marion County Detention Center, where Washington County inmates are typically housed, said the lessening of the jail population is essential.

“Who could have foreseen this?” he said. “This is unprecedented. It has taken our whole nation by surprise.”

The drop at the MCDC is about a 23 percent decrease in the inmate population, a little less than the 28 percent released statewide at the state’s approximately 80 county jails reported Monday by the Lexington Herald Leader.

Not all those released

from the MCDC were released due to coronavirus concerns; Brady did not have that number readily available Monday.

Courts in both Marion and Washington counties have ordered the release of some inmates, Brady said.

Releasing inmates could be the best chance to lessen the chance of spread of the virus—and deaths—because of the inability to practice proper social distancing inside the jail, Brady said.

“Most of our jails in our nation were built dormitory style,” he said. “I don’t have 300 separate bedrooms.”

Institutions such as jails, prisons, hospitals and nursing homes are all bracing for potential outbreaks.

“The risk factor goes to an extreme level,” Brady said.

Factors such as the inability to isolate employees while not on the clock also plays a role, he said. An employee who comes into contact with the virus while outside could easily bring it into the jail

population.

Before March 13, the MCDC, a 297-bed facility, housed 320 inmates. Though crowded, the facility was nowhere near as overcrowded as some county jails in Kentucky, which have at times housed more than twice the number of inmates they were built to hold.

The overcrowding is one of several reasons some are calling for the release of more inmates.

The state’s chief public defender warned in a letter to the secretary, Justice and Public Safety Cabinet and the chair of the Kentucky Parole Board that action to reduce populations needs to be taken before a catastrophe occurs.

Jails will not have the capacity to contain the spread of infection and jails are not equipped to handle the medical crisis that would ensue when trying to address COVID-19 within the jail, Damon L. Preston wrote. Jails are also at greater risk of infection because people are constantly be-

ing booked and released, potentially exposing other inmates and staff to COVID-19.

Since March 13, 72 inmates have been released from the MCDC, including 39 Marion County inmates and 15 Washington County inmates, Brady said.

About 20 of those released from the Marion County Detention Center were state inmates.

Most all were classified as “non-violent” offenders, Brady said.

“There are people who need to stay in—those charged with sex crimes and extreme violent offenses,” he said. “I haven’t seen anyone consider releasing any of those inmates.”

Many being released are those who have underlying health conditions, Brady said.

“There’s a lot of attention going to health issues,” he said.

Jails across the state are taking what actions they can to try to prevent COVID-19 from entering the facility.

At MCDC, no in-

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**Barry Brady**  
**Marion County Jailer**

person visitation is allowed. The lobby has been locked down. Staff are screened when they come on duty, including have their temperature taken. Movement inside is controlled.

Outside time is limited to one group of cellmates at a time. Inmates who share a cell (dorm) take one hour of recess together each day, Brady said.

Activities including religious services, addiction support meetings and GED classes have stopped.

The last is especially hard on inmates, Brady said.

“It makes it very trying,” he said. “It brings a lot of stress.”

That extra stress makes life at the jail, and man-

aging it, extremely tough. Managing stress levels jail is vital.

“It’s complex when you’re dealing with human lives in confinement,” he said. “You can’t not care about stress of the prisoners.”

Officials also are trying to ensure staff take precautions when off duty.

“We’re trying to educate staff on social distancing and stressing to definitely avoid any gatherings,” Brady said.

Brady said the releasing of inmates should not be seen as anyone being “soft on crime.”

“It’s because of true public safety issues,” he said. “Everybody’s trying to make the best decisions for public health.”