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Reducing the curve:

CORRECTIONS MAKES ITS MARK IN REDUCING COVID-19

BY ALEXANDER CARRIGAN

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020 has changed numerous institutions across the globe, leading to worldwide adjustments in the way we as individuals, groups and organizations interact with one another. The last several months have seen sports seasons

anceled, highly anticipated film and television releases delayed, and new protocols added to even the most basic institutions in our daily lives. We've seen how serious and important the use of proper hand washing has become and the necessity to wear face masks in public.

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While there have been sweeping changes in many fields, the corrections field is one that has seen some of the largest and most necessary changes. This is in part because the corrections field is one of the most dangerous fields to work in during this time. As essential workers, our correctional employees and officers are constantly at-risk of contracting the virus. They're constantly leaving the safety of their homes, spending time in places where it is nearly impossible to practice social distancing, and are spending time in locations where the virus can be easily transmitted.

However, it is no surprise that, while the corrections field is dealing with this new threat, there are many ways it is also responding to the pandemic in positive ways. Correctional officers and employees are still hard at work ensuring their facilities are run properly and their inmates are receiving all the support they need. Here are just a few of the ways the field of corrections has lent its hand in reducing the curve and ensuring safety during the time of COVID-19:

Safety and precautions

Due to numerous regulations and safety protocols, it is now common, and, in many states, required that persons leaving their home take proper precautions to ensure the virus doesn't spread as easily. Wearing facemasks to cover the mouth and nose has been seen as a necessary precaution, and the field of corrections has sought to ensure plenty of medical facemasks have been delivered to their facilities. In Pennsylvania, two employees at SCI Greene got into the



Image courtesy of Pennsylvania Department of Corrections via Twitter

mask-making craze and made over 200 custom masks for their facility. These colorful, fun masks show their creativity and ability to find the bright side in this time.

They're not the only ones getting behind the mask making trend of this time. Back in May, the Indiana Department of Corrections (IDOC) called on their community to donate supplies to make face masks for their facilities. By asking for elastic, hair ties, and anything that's 100% cotton, IDOC was able to gather enough materials to cover any mask shortages, while also showing just how easy it is to make face coverings.

It's also in this time that many facilities and department of corrections began to offer free testing for correctional officers and employees and their families. Some states like Tennessee and North Carolina began offering free testing as May rolled around.

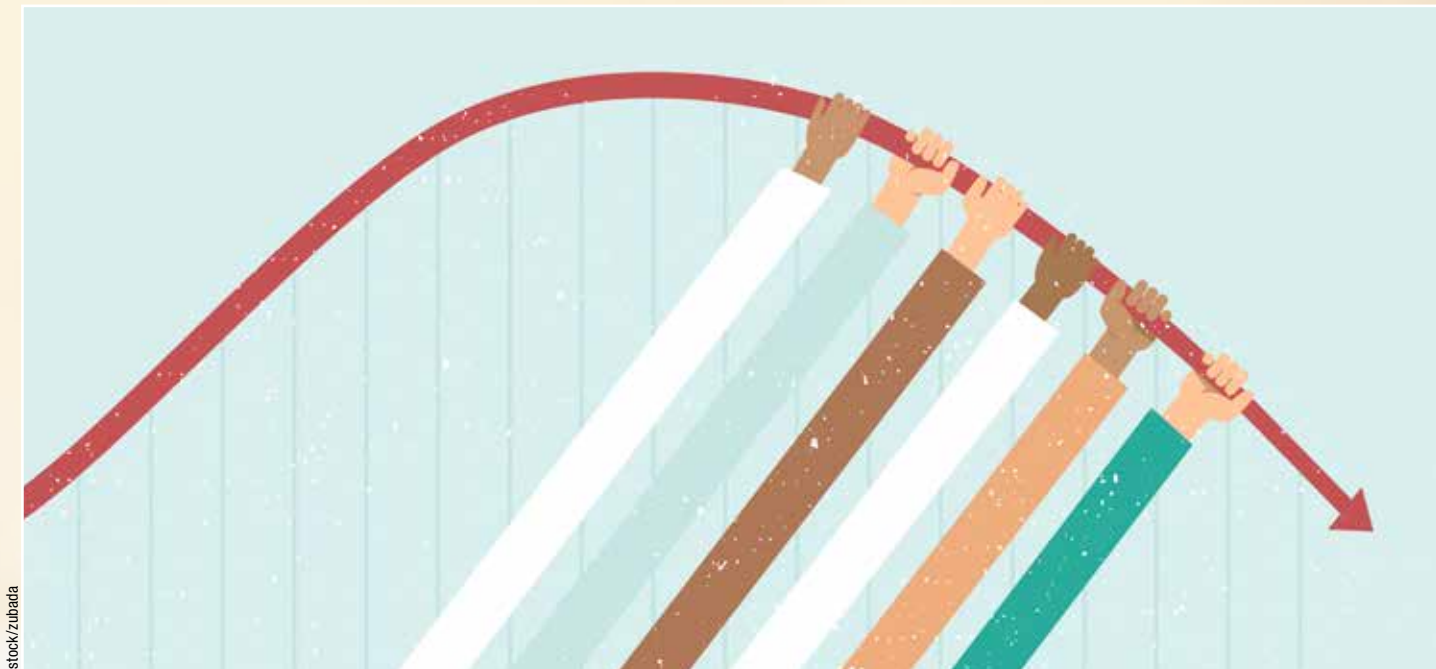
"The continued health and safety of our dedicated staff are our priorities as they bravely carry out our public safety mission through this pandemic," Adult Correction and Juvenile Justice Chief Deputy Secretary Tim Moose told WECT News 6 about North Carolina's free testing.

While it remains to be said exactly how effective these methods are in reducing the numbers, it's a great, homemade start to reducing the numbers within these facilities.

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New technology

Many correctional facilities have begun adapting new technology in order to also help identify and reduce the spread of COVID-19. The Jackson County



Jail in Brownston, Indiana, for example, began using a machine normally used to disinfect hospital surgery rooms in their facility. The machine uses ultraviolet lights to easily eliminate bacteria and germs, in some cases in as little time as 12-14 minutes. It also helps the facility by reducing the cost of buying cleaning supplies and works independently, allowing the facility staff to focus on other matters while it cleans. Jail commander Chris Everheart said that he thinks “staff will spend less time of work using sick time, and the inmates will be in a healthier, cleaner environment.”

Not to be outdone, the Jefferson County Jail in Birmingham, Alabama, installed a brand new body scanner to help with the adjusted procedures due to COVID-19. The device is to help reduce the contact between correctional employees and officers with those being booked into the facility. The scanners do full body searches and spot any contraband they may be attempting to bring inside, ensuring that officers and employees don’t need to risk contact with someone who could be carrying the virus.

But the technology isn’t limited to just booking inmates and cleaning their spaces. In Idaho, a move has been made to use virtual calling systems to ensure the inmates are able to continue their lives within the facilities. This has also expanded to community

corrections, where probation and parole officers are able to use virtual calls to check in on their clients.

Going forward

These are only a few examples of what is being done in the field of corrections in response to COVID-19, and every day, more and more changes and regulations are being applied. It’ll be a long time before the field can return to its procedures before the pandemic, but these are a few of the changes that will hopefully ensure the health and safety of those inside correctional facilities from all levels. Of course, this hasn’t entirely prevented the loss of life in this time, but it has seen a reduction in numbers that will hopefully continue to decline until a vaccine is found and the virus can join smallpox and polio in the annals of history.

For now, it’ll be on those within correctional facilities to do their part in ensuring the virus is eliminated or prevented from spreading. It’ll require a lot of personal effort and accountability, and we only hope that those in the field do their best to stay safe and stay aware of the changing landscape in this time.

Alexander Carrigan is an associate editor for the American Correctional Association.