



The Correctional Investigator  
Canada

L'Enquêteur correctionnel  
Canada

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April 15, 2020

Ms. Tina Namiesniowski  
President of the Public Health Agency of Canada  
130 Colonnade Road  
Ottawa, ON  
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Dear Ms. Namiesniowski,

In my capacity as Correctional Investigator of Canada, I am recommending that two immediate public health measures be taken in federal penitentiaries affected by COVID-19.

First, in federal institutions that have experienced an outbreak of COVID-19 it is imperative that testing of all inmates and staff be prioritized to contain the spread of the virus. I understand that testing is at the discretion of local public health authorities, but as we have seen in outbreaks at a number of long term care facilities, people living in communal or closed living spaces are especially vulnerable to contracting and spreading this disease introduced from the outside. Inconsistent testing approaches depending on the regions/provinces where penitentiaries are located is concerning. It bears reminding that the determinants of health among the inmate population are unique and generally poor compared with the general population. More than 700 federal inmates are aged 65 or older, the majority of whom have underlying chronic health conditions. Moreover, a high incidence of mental, cognitive, intellectual and substance use disorders are aggravating factors that would severely compromise COVID-19 outcomes for this population. Some inmates are reluctant to disclose their health status to staff and fear being placed in medical isolation or symptomatic ranges where conditions are akin to solitary confinement. It is important that inmate health considerations be taken with the same seriousness as those living in long-term care facilities, and that federal guidance for correctional facilities in Canada be issued to include testing of both inmates and staff in facilities where COVID-19 is present.

Secondly, though correctional staff are provided medical masks as personal protective equipment, inmates have not been provided with either medical or non-medical masks, except those who have acquired the disease. I understand

that medical masks are in short supply in Canada and should be prioritized for health care professionals. However, consistent with guidance from the Chief Public Health Officer, non-medical masks/face

coverings are an additional public health measure that all Canadians could use to prevent transmission of the virus to others – preventing both transmission of asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic individuals. In context of this pandemic, federally sentenced individuals should be treated equally and be afforded the same public health choice as the rest of Canadians.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the leadership and tremendous effort of the Public Health Agency of Canada in protecting Canadians. It is my sincere hope that measures and guidance being considered by our public health authorities to fight COVID-19 are inclusive and applicable to all Canadians, including those deprived of their liberty.

Sincerely,

***Original signed by***

Dr. Ivan Zinger  
Correctional Investigator

c.c.: The Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of Public Safety  
The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health  
Dr. Teresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada  
Anne Kelly, Commissioner, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC)  
Jennifer Wheatley, Assistant Commissioner Health Services, CSC  
Dr. James Worthington, Senior Medical Advisor, CSC