



COOK COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Thomas J. Dart, Sheriff

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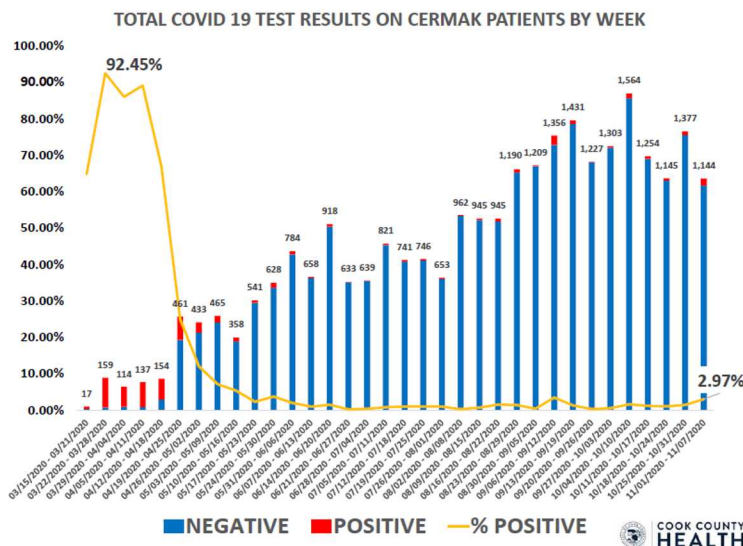
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COVID-19 Rise in Community Leads to Case Increase in Cook County Jail

COOK COUNTY, IL – As the Chicago area experiences a significant rise in COVID-19 cases, the Cook County Jail is also reporting an increase in cases, Cook County Sheriff Thomas J. Dart and Cook County Health Chair of Correctional Health Dr. Connie Mennella announced Thursday.

For the past five months, the test positivity rate for COVID-19 among detainees at the Cook County Jail had fluctuated between approximately 1 percent and 2 percent, despite an increase in the jail population. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention attributed the low number of positive cases to aggressive, first-in-the-nation testing, social distancing, and PPE protocols at the Jail.



With community COVID-19 spread increasing, the current 7-day average for test positivity among detainees at Cook County Jail – where testing is conducted at a much higher rate than in the surrounding communities – has risen to 2.97%. Meanwhile, the current positivity rate is 15.2% for Cook County and 14.5% for the City of Chicago.

As of Thursday, there were 91 positive cases among 5,426 detainees. Since intake testing began in April, most of the new positive cases have been identified in newly arriving detainees rather than among those who have been in custody. Positive cases among jail staff are also increasing, with 63 currently positive for the virus.

While the current number of positives is low compared to the one-day peak of 307 positive cases at the height of the initial outbreak in mid-April, the increase in the community is cause for concern.

“If the virus is proliferating outside of the jail walls, it is going to eventually get through even the best defenses, either from staff who must go about their lives outside of work or through incoming detainees,” said Sheriff Dart. “We are determined to use all our resources and ingenuity to stop this spread, but we also need the community’s help. Please practice social distancing and wear your mask: it saves lives.”

Sheriff Dart and Dr. Mennella said that over the past five months, most of the new detainee cases are identified when those individuals are first booked into the jail during a rigorous two-test policy or in separation housing that detainees who test negative at intake are held in for 14 to 21 days prior to being moved into general population.

The Sheriff’s Office is continually working to expand existing on-site testing for staff, increase the use of technology to improve contact tracing and introduce additional policies to increase social distancing.

The jail has continued its early pandemic practices of broad testing, extensive use of single celling to provide social distancing, heightened cleaning and sanitizing and mask requirements for detainees and staff. Any detainee who tests positive is immediately isolated and receives medical supervision, while those who were in contact with the detainee are tested, quarantined, and observed.

Jail staff also work with detainees who are ordered released from custody by contacting residents at their homes to check whether anyone at the home is positive for COVID or has been exposed to the virus. Staff also screen detainees for any symptoms of the virus prior to release, and work with them to find alternative housing if they cannot safely return home due to COVID-19.

Jail staff have their temperatures taken prior to each shift and are required to report any contact they have with individuals who are symptomatic or positive for COVID-19. Any staff member who is feeling sick must not report to work until they are medically cleared.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control found these were among the many interventions and protocols that enabled the jail to quickly reduce virus spread in the spring. CDC officials noted that the policies

enacted by the Sheriff's Office and Cermak Health Services served as a model to the nation. Many of the strategies have been adopted at jails and prisons around the country.

Unfortunately, the dedicated staff the Cook County Jail and Cermak Health Services cannot prevent an outbreak alone.

Dr. Mennella and Sheriff Dart urged citizens who may be weary of following COVID-19 rules to continue to adhere to the lifesaving instructions from public health experts. Community spread, they said, will translate into infections in close-quarter settings like the jail, impacting staff and detainees.

"We have been clear since the beginning that what happens in the community will happen in the jail. The combination of high community infection rates and the increased census has created new challenges" Dr. Mennella said. "

"We have hundreds of staff, visitors and detainees who come into the jail every day from the community that we are trying to protect. As a physician, I am urging everyone in the community including our patients and staff to follow all of the mitigation guidance all of the time. COVID fatigue is real. We get it. But when we let our guard down, the virus thrives. Action is needed to protect the jail including everyone's participation with getting this virus under control in the community."