

Life at Joyceville Minimum During COVID-19

Kevin Belanger

I will begin by stating that as I write here in May 2020, three months into the COVID-19 pandemic, I can only confirm what has gone on here at Joyceville and what I have been told is that much of what has happened here also applies to other federal penitentiaries in the Ontario Region. We are and have always been virus free here at Joyceville. As Prisoner Committee Chairman, I am updated and consulted by management on any change each day, sometimes more than once. This method is working as we continue to remain virus free. Several times over the past month, I have submitted proposals to senior management for their consideration. We manage to consistently come up with a plan that makes all sides happy.

COVID-19 took everyone by surprise, including the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). Sorry to say, I have been around for years and we have never had such a scare that has so strongly affected us both inside and outside the jails. This is an ongoing issue inside here that changes on a daily basis and staff have continued to work extremely hard to keep us and their families safe.

I have read and seen on TV that other penitentiaries have not been as lucky as we have. In those cases, the virus has gotten inside and it has been very hard. We continue to work hard to make sure that does not happen here.

We have suffered as prisoners because all of our ETAs and UTAs, work releases, touch visits, gyms, weight pits and libraries have been closed for months now. This has been upsetting to many whose release plans are now on hold. Our families and friends worry about us as we worry about them.

Throughout this time, CSC staff here have worked with us. We requested and received another video visit terminal. We have received additional monthly funds from national headquarters for our phone use so that many who cannot afford to call their families are able do just that. We have not been made to pay room and board during this time, allowing all of us to spend more in the prisoner canteen. Furthermore, we receive a letter from the commissioner of the national headquarters herself every two weeks that keeps us updated on the virus and any changes that impact federal prisoners. This is something I have never seen happen in all my years inside.

I have been around and seen a lot but nothing like this. Generally, the CSC staff have really stepped up and continue to do all they can to keep this place virus free while still allowing us as much freedom as possible. Over the past few weeks, we have slowly been adjusting to what may be the new

normal. It is a difficult balancing act to decide when and how to open, how quickly or how slowly. We here are sorry to say that we have several seniors who are at risk necessitating that CSC take additional precautions.

We all hope this will soon end but, until that time, we continue to work as a team and do the best we can. Our strategies are working and we remain virus free. However, some people are never happy – we see this inside as well as outside. To make a comment and have a view on anything, I feel it is necessary to be educated on the subject. This is so true about the virus and how it continues to affect everyone, including those of us doing time and the CSC staff that still come here to do their jobs every day. I hope this gives you a picture of what is going on here, and that we are also feeling the stress and pain from COVID-19 right along with everyone outside.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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