
SANTA RITA JAIL BULLETIN

Issue 1 | March 2020

WELCOME TO THE SANTA RITA JAIL BULLETIN

This is a monthly bulletin featuring updates on Santa Rita Jail; including labor conditions, health issues, progress on the multiple federal civil rights lawsuits against the jail, and commentary by prisoners. Throughout our communications with many inmates inside the jail, when we have asked what people outside can do to support them, one near-universal request that has emerged has been to keep the public informed on the reality of ongoing conditions inside. As our primary organizing goal is to support the needs and well-being of prisoners, the establishment of this bulletin is one part of our efforts to meet this request. We aim to inform you so that together, we can continue to build a robust network of support for people experiencing neglect, abuse, and exploitation by the Alameda County Sheriff's Department.

COVID-19 AND SANTA RITA JAIL

As businesses, schools, and institutions close to reduce the transmission of COVID-19, many people are wondering how to support people in jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers. We have also received inquiries from journalists and investigators about the coronavirus, how inmates in Santa Rita have fared, and whether they are able to maintain adequate hygiene to prevent the spread of disease.

First and foremost, we want to emphasize that conditions inside Santa Rita (as in all jails and prisons), have ALWAYS BEEN A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS, as prisoners have continually emphasized in their communiqués.

Institutions such as Santa Rita have *never* provided access to the proper cleaning and sanitation supplies, nor anywhere near adequate medical care. These deprivations were a key issue of the 2019 workers' strike and remain a vital concern of prisoners who continue to organize for basic improvements in living conditions. As the grievance's section on sanitation describes:

"The parts of Santa Rita Jail that the inmates use are filthy. The jail makes inmates responsible for cleaning our cells but refuses to provide enough cleaning supplies, cleaning tools and only on an irregular and infrequent basis. When supplies are provided, they are provided for too short a period of time. Some of us do not receive cleaning supplies for weeks on end. With 30 people in a cell, or a pod,

that leads to inmates living in filth and squalor. Too often, homeless people off the street are simply placed into the housing units without having first had the opportunity to wash. New arrestees detoxing from drugs are simply placed into the cells and are often sick with diarrhea or vomiting, causing the cells to be filthy. As a result, disease, skin infections, and similar issues are common. The holding cells, the multi-purpose rooms, the cells in ITR are also filthy. Holding cells and often the multi-purpose have feces, old moldy food, garbage, and they stink. Inmates are held in the multi-purpose room for long periods of time and there is no bathroom in the multipurpose room. Inmates end up having to relieve themselves in garbage cans or in the corner. This is awful and wrong. These rooms need to be cleaned several times a day. The "shower" in ITR is so filthy, that no one ever uses it, and no one can use it."

As we have already witnessed in 2020, prisoners inside Santa Rita were not spared during this year's flu season, and many people became extremely ill. If the jail's handling of this outbreak and the overall quality of medical care and sanitation is any indication of what the jail's approach to an outbreak of COVID-19 would be, this foreshadows a critical and dangerous scenario for the inmate population. Our community needs to remain vigilant and be prepared to demand an adequate, comprehensive, and humane response — **as we should be demanding in regards to all cases of medical neglect**

and the ongoing health and sanitation crisis inside the jail. Such a response would entail suspending arrests, closing the jail, and releasing elders and medically vulnerable people — a goal that our commitment to abolition has always compelled us to strive for. Support for our incarcerated community members, in light of indifference and mismanagement by the state, should be a part of any community emergency preparedness plan. **Join us in calling the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, and Senator Nancy Skinner to demand that the jail provide people with cleaning supplies and hygiene products.** [See phone zap information at the end of this bulletin for details.]

THE COLLECTIVE GRIEVANCE

From late October to November 2019, a week-long work stoppage and hunger strike mobilized over 400 people inside Santa Rita jail to refuse meals, commissary, and work assignments. Prisoners delivered a comprehensive statement regarding their conditions; as well as a list of demands, which included regular access to cleaning supplies, regular meal times, more nutritious food, lower commissary prices, and more time out of their cells. This remarkable display of political unity and discipline was met with retaliation by the jail, which attempted to suppress the peaceful protest through lockdowns, raids, and inmate transfers between housing units within the jail and to other institutions in the Bay Area.

Four months later, prisoners inside Santa Rita are still suffering from abuse, neglect and abysmal conditions. The jail is simultaneously subjecting inmates to greater scrutiny while it remains highly disorganized in the aftermath of the work stoppage – which disrupted the jail's ability to exploit inmate's unpaid labor for the benefit of its food vendor, Aramark Correctional Services. **Prisoners want the public to know that they continue to organize for the improvement of their basic living conditions. They have drafted a detailed grievance describing the ongoing abuses they experience, which has been circulated throughout the jail for inmates to add their signatures in support of the statement.** This grievance, a response to the jail's blatant disregard of the inmate grievance process, is the product of months of careful organizing. Santa Rita deputies have attempted to prevent its circulation by raiding prisoners' rooms and confiscating signatures.

Delivered with the signatures on Monday, March 16 to Santa Rita Jail staff and the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, this grievance represents a major risk for prisoners who face retaliation and group punishment for exposing the conditions they face. Please join us in reading the following statement, in prisoners' own words, and share widely with your networks. Join us in calling the Board of Supervisors, Santa Rita Jail, and Senator Nancy Skinner on Wednesday, March 18 to demand: **No retaliation against prisoners! End the culture of cruelty! End group punishment!** [See phone zap information at the end of this bulletin for details.]

The introduction of the collective grievance states:

"We are all inmates under the custody of the Alameda County Sheriff's Office: Santa Rita Jail. Our ultimate goal is to improve the overall conditions unto which all inmates of this institution are subject. We therefore, as inmates, affirm our consensus that the issues we list in this grievance, are common to all of us, and are the most significant issues we all endure. We are filing a group grievance because of the difficulty with filing grievances within Santa Rita Jail.

The Alameda County Sheriff's Office provides no information or guidance on the grievance process. There is an inmate handbook, but most inmates do not receive an inmate handbook. And the information in the handbook is very limited. There is no posted information on grievances or the grievance process, and what information inmates have is through transmission from another inmate, or experience at another facility. Blank grievances are difficult to obtain. Sheriff deputies discourage and pressure inmates not to file grievances. Even when grievances are submitted, the process is such that the jail itself often does not follow its own process, and a carbon copy of the grievance with a tracking number is not returned to the filing inmates. Even when the filing inmate receives the pink carbon with a tracking number, the jail sometimes does not respond, or responds very belatedly. We prisoners have difficulty learning what the Santa Rita grievance process is and even more difficulty correctly following the grievance process.

These practices make filing grievances so difficult, in order to raise our voices and bring attention to

the awful, difficult to endure conditions at Santa Rita Jail, we have no choice but to file a group grievance about the daily, long standing, unconstitutional and inhumane conditions of confinement we are subjected to. Santa Rita needs to evolve its systems and methods away from this punitive and demoralizing jail system with inhumane treatment of citizens and drug addicts to a modernized system and methods of restorative justice! The jail needs to end its culture of cruelty. The current system does not make our communities any safer! To the contrary, it makes them less secure! Inmates leaving the jail are not better for having been in jail. We need to build people up, make them productive and restore their health and vitality."

FLU OUTBREAK AND QUARANTINE

Santa Rita Jail is widely known for its unsanitary conditions and poor medical care – the most recent major manifestation of which was a February flu outbreak and quarantine. News of this flu outbreak was shared privately in a memo to attorneys. After several prisoners became extremely ill, three housing units (24, 31, and 34) were quarantined through February. Attorneys received a call from a woman reporting that one prisoner in Unit 24 was extremely ill and that women booked into the jail would be routed to a different unit. Scheduled visitation and court dates were suspended during the quarantine. **Additionally, prisoners reported that some sick individuals were locked down in their cells, rather than receiving medical care.**

Health care for prisoners is provided through a for-profit contract with California Forensic Medical Group. CFMG is financially responsible for hospital visits and outpatient care. **It is authorized by the jail to determine when it is necessary or appropriate to move prisoners offsite, creating a strong incentive for the institution to withhold care and to delay vital procedures.** As of December 2019, the facility has reported 43 deaths in the last 5 years, a statistic that supports Santa Rita's reputation as one of the deadliest jails in the state. Community organizers suspect that in reality these numbers could be even higher due to underreporting of prisoner deaths. This is made possible by a policy that does not classify deaths that occur after release or in a hospital as "in-custody," even if a prisoner was injured or became ill while incarcerated.

KITCHEN AND LABOR UPDATE: RESTRUCTURING LABOR AFTER THE STRIKE

Santa Rita Jail forces prisoners to work for no pay, in violation of state and federal law. A for-profit contract between the jail and Aramark Correctional Services, LLC puts prisoners to work in the large industrial kitchen, which supplies food for Santa Rita as well as for other Bay Area jails. In the wake of the October-November 2019 strike, two federal civil rights lawsuits were filed against the Alameda County Sheriff's Office by two classes of plaintiffs who are currently or recently incarcerated at Santa Rita Jail. *Ruelas v. Alameda County*, filed November 20th, confirms that "Sheriff's deputies threaten plaintiffs and other prisoner employees of Aramark that if they refuse to work, they will receive longer jail sentences or be sent to solitary confinement, where they would be confined to a small cell for 22 to 24 hours a day." Attorneys charge that intimidation, threats, and unpaid labor of detainees both before and during the workers' strike violate California labor code, the Equal Pay Act, and the US Constitution.

Inmate labor inside Santa Rita has been restructured in the wake of the October-November work stoppage. Initially, women and protective custody inmates were forced to fill the shifts of striking prisoners who had been fired. By late December 2020, however, the jail shifted to a "volunteer-based" system: if they wanted to work, prisoners could sign up on a sheet provided in their housing unit. A deputy said to one prisoner, "we can't make it seem like we're forcing you to do anything."

However, the jail continues to compel prisoners to work through a combination of minor benefits and living conditions that are so unbearable as to make working in the kitchen a relief. Kitchen workers may receive a second mattress (single mattresses are extremely thin and hard), an extra snack such as a sandwich or frozen burrito, and time out of their cells – an otherwise rare event. As the collective grievance describes:

"We all suffer from enforced idleness, lack of programs and services....Some days, we are locked up all day, 24 hours...[all inmates] are punished by being excessively locked up in our cells, deprived of real exercise opportunities, deprived of outdoor exercise."

The consequence of this “volunteer-based” system was an even greater level of disorganization:

“Since the kitchen workers strike, portions have been so small that many of us are left hungry afterwards. The times for meals is arbitrary and random. Some of us have gotten dinner after 10 pm at night. Some of us have had to wait 12 hours between meals.”

Additionally, people volunteering to be medically cleared for kitchen work are now necessarily “reclassified” to a higher security level within the jail. Whereas kitchen workers pre-strike were minimum-level security inmates (wearing blue jumpsuits), the inmates now working in the kitchen are medium-level security (wearing yellow jumpsuits). This reclassification means that inmates who “volunteer” to work in the kitchen then have to appear in court in higher-level security clothing than they would have otherwise, which negatively impacts how they are perceived by judges and prosecutors.

The kitchen remains disorganized, dangerous, and unsanitary. Prisoners have suffered serious hand lacerations from the meat slicer, back injuries, and other repetitive stress injuries from lifting heavy trays. Prisoners have also reported finding razorblades, rodent feces, and maggots in the food, which is highly vulnerable to contamination due to the fact that it is left unrefrigerated overnight in ovens to be heated for the next day’s meal. The kitchen itself is also infested with cockroaches, which plaintiffs reported seeing on the floor and on the walls of the break room. Kitchen workers are not provided with non-slip mats, resulting in frequent slip-and-fall injuries. One prisoner affirmed that the break room is nearly unusable due to flooded sinks and toilets, and that the jail only conducts repairs in preparation for scheduled inspections by the county.

A class member of *Ruelas v. Alameda County* says, “there is a collective understanding among inmates that this is too much – it’s a hard job that people should be paid for...they don’t respect us even on a basic communication level.”

FEATURED ISSUE:

Family and Community Visitation

“Family love and family connection are really important for inmates to keep our humanity...the jail should be encouraging our family contacts and encouraging our connection to our community. Family connections and community connections assist in preventing recidivism. We are not animals and even if we were...animals need to be loved too... [one inmate] was a pretrial detainee and his case was eventually dismissed. The five years he was in custody in Santa Rita Jail, he never got to hug or hold his son.”

Lack of access to visitation is an ongoing and incredibly important issue to inmates at Santa Rita Jail — one that was highlighted both in the November 2019 strike demands and also in the collective grievance.

Contact with loved ones is crucial to maintaining inmates’ well-being, mental health, and humanity and has devastating consequences when it is revoked.

The jail has routinely denied visitation to inmates in a number of ways. According to one inmate, **the jail makes any attempt to make inmates miss visits from**

family and loved ones, who often have travelled hours to see them. Inmates have regularly reported the jail to:

- Not notify inmates that they have a visit scheduled, when they could easily post a list of visits in housing units or announce it over the loudspeaker
- Arbitrarily shut off the video phones (for minimum-level prisoners)
- Place inmates on lockdown shortly before a scheduled visit
- Cancel visits because they allege that there is not enough staff to walk inmates to the visits or to monitor a video visit (the jail also insists that a deputy must be present for video visits, even though there is no clear reason why).

Additionally, ongoing lockdowns have been a persistent reality in the jail, and no visitation at all is allowed while a lockdown is in effect. **When inmates are willfully prevented from visiting, families and loved ones who have often traveled hours to the jail are turned**

away without any notice, information, or explanation.

Deputies are also known to routinely tell the family or loved ones that the inmate has refused the visit when this is not in fact the case. This ongoing issue causes confusion and frustration on both the part of the loved ones and the inmates, leading to tension and fractures in the relationships between them. This can lead loved ones to visit less often, leaving inmates feeling isolated, alone, and disconnected from family and community. This in turn affects the mental health of prisoners. According to one inmate, this has resulted in some giving up on their sobriety and turning to substance use.

When visits do occur, the jail makes this process as difficult as possible for prisoners. Phone calls are increasingly expensive, placing a strain on inmates and their fam-

ilies. Frequent technical issues with video visits reduce the length and quality of a visit. Without technicians to deal with these problems, they go unaddressed. Visits are often cut short without explanation. When deputies deliberately draw out the process of locking and unlocking doors and escorting inmates to visits, it reduces the vital time that people need to reconnect with family members. One example of this mismanagement comes from an inmate who reported that he wasn't returned to his housing unit for 6 hours after his visits had ended.

Taking away connections to family, loved ones, and community is damaging and dehumanizing. In their collective grievance, prisoners **"demand an end to being devoid, desensitized and dehumanized by the lack of human contact."**

PHONE ZAP! 9am-5pm, Wednesday March 18

SUPPORT THE SANTA RITA JAIL COLLECTIVE GRIEVANCE & PRISONERS' DEMANDS FOR SAFE AND SANITARY LIVING CONDITIONS!

Inmates in Alameda County's Santa Rita Jail have filed a collective grievance to the Alameda County Board of Supervisors and Santa Rita Jail describing ongoing horrific jail conditions and demanding improvements. Call the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, Board of Supervisors, and State Senator to tell them to meet prisoner demands and refrain from retaliating against prisoners!

PHONE ZAP SCRIPT:

Hello,

I am calling in support of the inmates inside Santa Rita Jail who filed a collective grievance to the Board of Supervisors and the Sheriff's Office on Monday. Santa Rita should meet all of the demands outlined in this grievance to improve jail conditions. I would like to highlight that one of the demands is regular access to cleaning supplies to reduce the risk of infection. What actions are you planning to take to support inmates who are being put at risk during a public health crisis? Additionally, inmates should not face punishment or retaliation for this peaceful action, which has highlighted the unacceptable conditions inside Santa Rita and the difficulty of inmates' voices being heard around these issues.

Thank you for your time.

PHONE ZAP NUMBERS:

Sheriff Gregory Ahern
(510) 272-6866

California State Senator Nancy Skinner
(510) 286-1333

Assistant Sheriff Dennis Houghtelling
(510) 208-9964

2nd District Supervisor & President Richard Valle
(510) 272 6692

*You don't have to give your name or any other information you don't want to. Entering *67 before any number may block your caller ID. Don't worry about anyone giving you the runaround, not getting through or having to leave a message. We are calling to apply pressure and every call counts.*