

Governor Gavin Newsom
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

4/30/2020

Dear Governor Newsom;

I am writing in followup of an earlier communication to your office from myself and the Del Norte County Healthcare District. We had urged that you order cessation of interfacility transfers of inmates between prisons at the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, to avoid spread of the coronavirus. Our joint concern was the prospect of an outbreak at Pelican Bay State Prison, which lies in my jurisdiction. My chief concern was based on eyewitness reports of lack of social distancing and procedures for restraining inmates that would not allow proper cough hygiene. The greater portion of that concern on my part was centered on the correctional officers, as the arriving inmates were to be housed in a quarantine status, but there was little or no control of the activity of the accompanying officers.

We learned that after the posting of the letter, and presumably by your direction, the Department did make some alterations and put a hold on transfers. I am fearful, however, that the spirit of the rule was observed, but not the letter of the rule-transfers of small numbers of inmates have continued to occur, largely to facilitate the return of inmates who needed to make a court appearance elsewhere in the state. The issue of the officers remains an open question.

As Health Officer, I am concerned about importing coronavirus to Pelican Bay, by any means. I'm actually more concerned that the virus will eventually be brought in by a worker on site, or a transferring staff member, but we have learned that there is a current outbreak in a sister correctional facility, and this does not bode well for the future. Others in our community have much greater concern about the status of the inmates themselves, and have been dismayed to learn that the transfers, however few they might be, have continued. I have been urged to use my authority as Health Officer to issue a cease and desist order to Pelican Bay and the CDCR to stop all movement of inmates and officers in or out of our county (excepting for medical reasons, of course.) I tried to explain to those of that opinion, that this might be counterproductive to any effort to deal with the issues, as I am certain that my order could easily be countermanded by Dr. Angell or yourself, or simply ignored. Personally, I do not see the value of creating a pointless dispute. But having said that, it also occurred to me that a local order might be one that your office might choose to support, in an effort to protect the inmates and the communities surrounding the facility where they are housed, and using Pelican Bay

as an example. I am certain that mine is not the only jurisdiction where continued transfers and the possible creation of an outbreak has been a topic of concern.

I am writing to seek guidance about how this particular issue could be addressed in a more complete and satisfactory fashion. I am concerned that the expert advice given to the CDCR leadership has not adequately factored in the level of care available locally, and the distance from Pelican Bay to an accepting tertiary care center, for those inmates who might become ill and need advanced specialty care. I am well aware that time and resources are limited these days, but I would appreciate your thoughts as well as those who are planning for the possible outbreaks in the prison system. In our county, if it happens it will be a huge drain on resources locally, and if timed at a moment when our sole hospital is already full with a community outbreak, it would be a disaster in the making. I do not wish to see a scenario such as that play out, if there is still a way to forestall the event.

Sincerely,

Warren Rehwaldt MD
Health Officer-Del Norte County