



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Area lawmakers urge Cuomo administration to take action against COVID-19 spread at Elmira Correctional Facility

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October 5, 2020

ISSUE:

- [Combating COVID-19 and Protecting New Yorkers' Health](#)



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Elmira, N.Y., October 5—State Senator Tom O’Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats), Assemblyman Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning), and Assemblyman Chris Friend (R,C,I-Big Flats) today called on Governor Andrew Cuomo and the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to immediately take aggressive steps to stop the spread of COVID-19 positive cases at the Elmira Correctional Facility.

According to The New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA), more than 40 corrections officers and 15 inmates at Elmira are currently in quarantine, with seven officers and five inmates testing positive.

O’Mara, Palmesano, and Friend highlighted several areas of concern surrounding the surge at the Elmira facility that will continue to pose a serious risk to inmates and staff there and potentially at other state correctional facilities.

Chief among the concerns is that DOCCS has not suspended visits to inmates from family members arriving from New York City and other downstate areas where COVID-19 infection rates remain high. Unlike at other congregate facilities like nursing homes, the Cuomo administration does not require proof of a negative coronavirus test before allowing visitors into state prisons for direct visits with inmates.

The area lawmakers also raised concerns over the lack of adequate testing to ensure that potentially COVID-infected inmates are not being transferred between state and county correctional facilities, as well as the increased risk of staffing shortages if the spike at the Elmira facility continues to require infected officers to be quarantined.

O'Mara, Palmesano and Friend said, "The Cuomo administration must immediately stop inmate visitations and prisoner transfers at the Elmira Correctional Facility. Our region is already facing concerns over new outbreaks and we need to keep this latest increase in check. The facility needs to be isolated until this surge is brought fully under control. The current spike puts inmates at great risk and, equally important, it poses an equally serious risk to the health and safety of local corrections officers, their families and the community at large. Moving forward, DOCCS must expand testing and establish stricter protocols on inmate visitations, prisoner transfers, and all other inmate programs and services, as well as more effectively address staffing levels. For starters, the state needs to immediately stop busing visitors from New York City and other high-risk downstate regions to Upstate prisons without requiring a negative COVID test and stop allowing direct personal contact between inmates and visitors. The Cuomo administration's state prison inmate visitation policy allows the visitor and inmate to hug at the beginning and end of the visit. You can't do that with your mom in a nursing home visit. The Cuomo administration should be as strict with prison visitations as it is with nursing home visits."

The area legislators are calling on the Cuomo administration to:

- > immediately suspend inmate transports and visitations;
- > require a mandatory negative Covid test for anyone entering the Elmira facility to visit an inmate;
- > suspend physical contact between inmates and visitors;
- > expand testing procedures and requirements at the facility; and
- > address and increase staffing levels to minimize strain on the Elmira workforce while officers are being quarantined.

Last Friday, The New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association released a statement to WETM 18 News that read, in part, "With ongoing issues of DOCCS moving inmates after possible exposure to COVID, counties sending

inmates without proper test results or quarantining, improper quarantine procedures, visiting being allowed...we have a recipe for disaster. It's time to isolate this (Elmira) facility by closing programs, stopping visits, stopping transportation and properly staff this facility to protect everyone. This would be the safe and smart approach, but is not being applied to this facility."