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Over 70 percent of tested inmates in federal prisons have COVID-19

Nation Apr 29, 2020 8:19 PM EDT

WASHINGTON (AP) — Michael Fleming never got to say goodbye to his father. He didn't know his dad was fading away on a ventilator, diagnosed with coronavirus at the federal prison where he was serving time for a drug charge.

His father, also named Michael, was held at FCI Terminal Island in Los Angeles and died April 19. At least half the population there has tested positive, the largest known hot spot in the federal prison system. But the first word the family received of the father's illness was the day he died, from a prison chaplain asking if the body should be cremated and where the ashes should be sent.

"They just left us all in the dark," Fleming said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We had to find out from the news what the actual cause of death was. It was kind of screwed up."

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The response from the federal Bureau of Prisons to the growing coronavirus crisis in prisons has raised alarm among advocates and lawmakers about whether the agency is doing enough to ensure the safety of the nearly 150,000 inmates serving time in federal facilities.

And even though officials have stressed infection and death rates inside prisons are lower compared with outside, new figures provided by the Bureau of Prisons show that out of 2,700 tests systemwide, nearly 2,000 have come back positive, strongly suggesting there are far more COVID-19 cases left uncovered.

At the same time, the Bureau of Prisons communication policies are leaving families in the dark about their loved ones' potentially life-threatening condition.

The 59-year-old Fleming had been serving a 20-year sentence on a drug conspiracy charge. The Bureau of Prisons never notified Fleming's family that he was taken to a hospital or when his condition declined.

"Not having the opportunity to say goodbye — that would've been invaluable," the younger Fleming said. "We will never have that chance."

Under Bureau of Prisons policy, the agency is supposed to "promptly" notify the family of inmates who have serious illnesses. But the agency, which confirmed the family wasn't initially notified, has "discretion when making notifications," according to a spokeswoman.

Prisons officials say they are doing the best they can under dire circumstances and following guidelines set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.