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The COVID-19 Struggle In Chicago's Cook County Jail

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CHERYL CORLEY

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Nurses and community faith leaders participate in a protest outside the Cook County Jail in Chicago, on April 10, 2020, calling for the release of prisoners from the jail. A federal judge ordered Cook County Jail to take prompt action to stop the spread of the coronavirus, including to make sure that the more than 4,000 detainees have access to adequate soap and sanitizer.

Nam Y. Huh/AP

Cook County Jail in Chicago is one of the country's largest and it's in a fierce battle with COVID-19. The rate of infection in the jail is higher than most anywhere else in the country. More than 500 people have tested positive so far. Detainees make up nearly two-thirds of the cases and three have died from apparent complications.

The county's public defender, the state's attorney, the sheriff and other officials agreed to release hundreds of people from the jail to help lower the COVID-19 threat — mainly those charged and still awaiting trial along with others serving less than a year for low-level crimes. Authorities conduct case-by-case reviews and nonprofit bail groups, such as the Chicago Community Bond Fund, use their money to get people out.

Linn, who agreed to talk with NPR if his full name wasn't used, was released in late March after the Fund paid his \$5,000 bond. The 51-year-old is on home monitoring and staying at a friend's house.



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"It's rough, I am glad to be out of there," Linn says. "I feel for a lot of the guys in there that can't get out of there — knowing that they're going to die in there."

There are fewer than 4,400 detainees in the jail — more than a 20 percent drop from a month ago. However, Linn says following CDC guidelines like social distancing and frequent hand washing is impossible in such a densely populated environment.

At a recent press conference at the jail, County Board President Toni Preckwinkle talked about releasing more people.

"Seventy-five to 80 percent need to be here because they are accused of violent crimes," Preckwinkle said. "That means we have about a thousand people that we could work to try to figure out how to get back into the community safely."

In a federal lawsuit, detainees argued the Cook County Sheriff isn't doing enough and hasn't provided safe living conditions inside. A judge dismissed some of their arguments, however he ordered the sheriff to take a number of steps, including providing adequate supplies of soap and hand sanitizer for frequent hand washing and establishing a policy for coronavirus testing.

The head of the jail, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, says change already has been underway. He and a local hospital set up a mobile testing site for employees. Visitors are no longer allowed in the jail. In an attempt to create social distancing, single cells are used when possible.

Dart says he and other officials knew the situation was not good early on, so in January he ordered COVID-19 screening for anyone coming into the jail and has since broadened the policy.

"We're part of this community here, we cannot just be releasing people in the community and saying 'good luck,'" he says. "Weeks ago we started screening people when they leave the jail to ensure that they aren't bringing something back to the community."



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The jail staff verifies that the person leaving jail has a place to stay, that he or she is COVID-19 free or that there's a place — a bedroom and bathroom — for isolation. They also work with groups like TASC, an organization that helps people leaving jail or prison. TASC President Pam Rodriguez says the organization will connect those who need housing with providers who are able to take people from the jail.

"They can maintain them on electronic monitoring if necessary," Rodriguez said, "and this is not shelter environments but halfway houses where there can be social distancing."

Meanwhile, a recent two-day emergency bailout helped more than 130 people leave the jail. Robin Steinberg, CEO of the Bail Project, says they plan to bail out hundreds more.

"I also hope when we get through this that we are going to be able to take a moment and ask why we had so many people in jail who hadn't been convicted of a crime in the first place," Steinberg said.

That debate is sure to come later but for now, there's an urgent focus on getting so many that remain in Cook County Jail, during the scourge of COVID-19, out of harm's way.

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