

Vermont's Corrections and Health Departments establish closer relationship to manage infectious disease in correctional facilities



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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Vermont Department of Health collaborated with the Vermont Department of Corrections to improve COVID-19 mitigation efforts to protect staff and incarcerated individuals. This collaboration has enhanced surveillance, allowed timely response to outbreaks, and minimized the burden of COVID-19 in the facilities.



The “What”

Correctional facilities are particularly vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 spread. Large numbers of incarcerated individuals reside in confined spaces, with many individuals arriving regularly in transfer from other facilities. Staff, who often work in close proximity to incarcerated individuals, may have different exposure points away from the facility. Significant staffing strains add to the challenges, as mitigation strategies are often experienced by staff as burdensome and extensive staff isolation policies can lead to short staffing. This can lead to a reduction in recreational and other wellness-focused activities for those incarcerated. Therefore, minimizing the number of outbreaks, and developing manageable outbreak responses was a high priority early in the pandemic, as was collecting reliable data to inform these efforts.

The Vermont Department of Health, in coordination with the state’s Department of Corrections (DOC), used Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding for testing and mitigation efforts to protect staff and incarcerated individuals. Funding enabled enhanced and data-driven screening, quarantining/distancing, and ensuring that personal protective equipment (PPE) is used properly by all individuals in the facilities. Living units were reassigned to provide dedicated spaces within each facility to individuals who were newly incarcerated (with COVID status unknown when they come into a facility), were close contacts of a known infection, and who tested positive for COVID-19.



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COVID-19 epidemiology and response teams from the Health Department and DOC were thus able to work together to incorporate epidemiologically grounded best practices in a way that fit DOC operations and that protected the health and wellbeing of incarcerated individuals and DOC staff.

The “So What”

DOC staff were able to support the testing, isolation, distancing, and PPE use as needed in support of COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Due to the close working relationships between DOC and VDH COVID-19 teams, DOC was able to adjust testing, isolation, distancing guidelines, and PPE usage based on any updated Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Vermont Department of Health guidance to ensure the health and safety of incarcerated individuals and staff working in DOC facilities. Coming out of the early 2022 Omicron peak, Health Department and DOC teams were able to develop a phased approach to COVID-19 response that prevented uncontrolled spread and minimized severe COVID-19 outcomes while attempting to minimize impact on other services and factors associated with wellbeing.

The Vermont Department of Health was able to conduct epidemiological surveillance on facilities through its work with DOC. Over the course of 30 outbreaks, Vermont’s correctional facilities have so far seen comparatively minimal severe illness and no known COVID-19 deaths.

The “Now What”

Vermont’s DOC has moved from its COVID-19 emergency response, and now incorporates COVID-19 guidance and lessons learned in an updated, general infectious diseases protocol, which was finalized with assistance from the Vermont Department of Health COVID-19 epidemiology staff. The Department’s Infectious Disease Epidemiology team will soon be working with DOC on other conditions, in order to leverage the strengthened collaboration across the two Departments.

Key contributors to this project include Vermont Department of Health – Infectious Disease Epidemiology; Vermont Department of Corrections.