NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Prisons Resumes Limited Offender Transfers to Accommodate Jail and Court System Movements

RALEIGH

May 27, 2020

The Division of Prisons has resumed a limited number of transfers of offenders to make room for other offenders sentenced to state prison. The movement of offenders currently housed in state prisons is being done in phases to prepare for the gradual reopening of the courts and the removal of a moratorium on the acceptance of prison-sentenced offenders from the county jails.

“The prison system is an integral part of the North Carolina criminal justice system and as the courts reopen and the jails again send offenders to serve their prison sentences, we have to make preparations by beginning to transfer offenders,” said Todd Ishee, the Commissioner of Prisons.

With limited exceptions, prison offenders have remained in place since April 6, when a moratorium was instituted on the acceptance of offenders from the county jails and a significant reduction on prison-to-prison transfers went into effect on April 7.

Last week, Chief Justice Cheri Beasley announced new court operations will phase in after June 1 as part of Governor Roy Cooper’s second phase of easing restrictions for the coronavirus.

“The majority of the prison offender population has, in effect, been quarantined for almost two months,” Ishee noted. “Our staff has worked hard to contain the spread, to implement virus-safety protocols, and we must remain vigilant as we prepare for the next phase of loosened restrictions using all necessary security and medical safety precautions.”

Transfers will be conducted in keeping with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), including the following practices:

- Offender temperatures will be checked before and after transportation, and screening questions will be asked to determine if any offenders report symptoms of COVID-19.
- Offenders who have tested positive for COVID-19, or who exhibit potential symptoms, will only be transported in cases where deemed medically necessary to provide enhanced treatment. In those limited instances, offenders will be transported individually in a vehicle with all necessary security and medical precautions.
- Transportation vehicles will be disinfected before and after each trip.
- Staff and offenders will perform hand hygiene immediately before and after each trip.
- Transportation officers will wear appropriate personal protective equipment. All offenders will wear cloth face coverings.
- Social distancing will be maintained during transportation, with buses at half capacity, except for those cases in which entire cohorts of quarantined offenders are moved, which is in keeping with guidance from DHHS.
- Offenders will be loaded, where possible, at the back of the buses and fill seats from front to back in order to better ensure that fewer people walk past them during the seating process.
- Offenders will not be transferred, at this point, from facilities with active outbreaks of COVID-19.
- All transferred offenders will be housed together as a cohort as much as possible as an additional medical precaution.

Transportation began May 26 for offenders who primarily require a change to their custody level because they have either earned promotion to lower custody level prisons or demotion to higher custody level prisons. Others require moves to or from restrictive housing.

The Division of Prisons will later phase in transportation of offenders at designated intake facilities to free up beds at those facilities for offenders who eventually will be transferred from county jails to serve their prison sentences.

All new admissions, including individuals transferring in from county jails will be tested for COVID-19 upon admission and quarantined until those results are returned.

“Placing offenders in the appropriate prison and custody level is fundamental to the continued safety of our staff, the entire prison system and our communities,” said Ishee. “We have carefully developed safety protocols and each transfer decision will be carefully evaluated for risk and the needs of our large and complex prison system.”

The vast majority of prison offenders who tested positive for COVID-19 since the pandemic began are now presumed recovered under DHHS guidance. As of today, fewer than 40 of the 31,500 offenders maintain an active positive test result. More information can be found here: https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/adult-correction/prisons/prisons-info-covid-19 (https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/adult-correction/prisons/prisons-info-covid-19).

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