



The Need for Oversight in Arizona’s Prisons: Stories from Affected People

Arizona’s prisons cost taxpayers \$1.3 billion annually, employ thousands of people, and are responsible for the lives of 42,000 incarcerated people, yet lack independent oversight, transparency, and accountability. Here are a few of the stories from people in prison and their families about what they go through every day dealing with the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR). Because incarcerated people and their family members fear retaliation and poor treatment by prison staff if they report problems, many are reluctant to speak out publicly or share their full names.

Arizona’s prisons lack quality medical, dental, and mental health care – and COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons have only made things worse.

“A man on my husband’s unit has been extremely sick for the past two weeks with no help from medical, and finally was taken to the hospital last night after starting to cough up blood. He has since been confirmed COVID positive. Incarcerated people have gotten so tired of being turned away by medical staff after being told to ‘stop smoking and drink more water’ no matter their ailment, that most will suffer in their beds rather than fill out a Health Needs Request. This leads to sicker patients and worse outcomes by the time they are finally evaluated. The ADCRR is not providing the medical care they have the responsibility to provide, and this is nothing new. People have stopped expecting help, because help never comes.” – family member

“I have a sick uncle up in Tucson and I am appalled at the things he tells me. First off, compassionate release should have been given to elderly and those with medical conditions. My uncle had a heart attack; he has high blood pressure and is diabetic. Something is very foul at ADCRR. Sick inmates being moved around and put in with inmates who are not affected, lack of soap and sanitizer, can’t cover their faces and lack of proper sanitation of the jail environment!” – Synndra Phoenix, family member

“Their living conditions are more dire than the elderly in nursing homes. They have NO WAY to socially distance and because of the lack of decent food and nutrition, their immune systems are vulnerable.” – P.Y., incarcerated person

Arizona’s prisons fail to meet even the most basic standards of hygiene and nutrition – in fact, some incarcerated people go hungry.

“We have rats/mice, they are not only in our living quarters but in our kitchen, where we eat and our food is prepared. The officers are aware as they have laid sticky traps but have caught nothing. There is rat/mice poop in our food boxes in our living quarters. The maintenance girl for our unit said she saw rat/mice poop on the grill in the kitchen and in the dish room on the counters. This is an ongoing problem that no one seems to be addressing. I do not want to wake



up with the rats/mice or even possibly get bit by one when I am sleeping.” – Veronica, an incarcerated woman

“The entire building is infested with roaches, I have killed hundreds of them. I have had to sleep with the lights on every night. The one time I slept with the lights off I had a roach crawl into my ear. I went to medical the next morning and had a nurse flush my ear out. I spoke with a supervisor and was told that if I wanted to move to another cell, I would have to take a major ticket for refusing to house.” – Damien, an incarcerated man

“My husband Wes has been in prison for almost 18 years. He has many more to go. So our perspective on prison conditions comes from experience. Wes suffers stomach problems. He had been taken to the hospital several times and he has been advised to eat more fruits and vegetables – which is impossible in an Arizona prison. Their diet consists of only starches and supposedly protein that according to many kitchen workers is labeled ‘not suitable for human consumption.’ Many times, they are fed bologna that smells like fish and has a green color. Imagine eating green bologna that smells like fish for 18 years.” – Lillian Coppess, family member

“Only two meals are served on the weekends – an ‘enhanced’ breakfast and then nothing else until a dinner tray 10 hours later. The breakfast is supposed to be served an hour later these days, to close the time gap until the next meal, but where my husband is, the early schedule from the week continues as usual. People are going more than 10 hours without food on these days, and if someone is indigent with no funds for commissary, they go hungry. By the time dinner comes around, the portions are considered by most to be inadequate for a grown person if they are edible at all.” – C.T., family member

Arizona’s prisons lack transparency. Corrections facilities deny access to the general public and press and regularly fail to provide information and be responsive to families trying to help an incarcerated loved one who is injured, ill, neglected, mistreated, or in need of help.

Claire’s family is halfway through a 10-year mandatory minimum prison sentence. Her husband Joshua was sentenced out of Yavapai County for possessing less than 2.5 grams of methamphetamine for personal use while he was in the grip of addiction. Their whole family is paying the cost, especially when it comes to communication with the DOC. “The Inmate Friends and Family Liaison (IFFL) line at the ADCRR Central Office rings through to voicemail with every call,” says Claire. “This started at the beginning of the pandemic and continues even now, almost a year later. It used to be when you called IFFL, you could talk to an actual person (who gave you the runaround nonetheless) but now all you can do is leave a voicemail and hope they call you back. When you need answers and help right away, being met with a cold voicemail greeting is very distressing.”