

COVID prompt response

How has Covid 19 affected me in the last month or two? Well here at SCI-CHESTER things were going pretty good since the first wave back in March/April. Not really any cases; some staff mostly, and a few men were placed on quarantine because of contact tracing with the staff member. Then all of a sudden October comes and we have an explosion of cases here. Over 150 staff and 300 or more incarcerated men, and that's only the people who got tested; the numbers might be two or three times that if everyone were tested. A good friend of mine Alvin "AL" Joyner lost his fight to the Coronavirus. A good man, served just over 50 years — yes, I said 50 years. He was sentenced to Death By Incarceration back in 1970, a year before I was born. He was in pretty good shape for a 75-year-old, still worked out: push ups, pull ups, lifting weights and staying active. He was one of the first inmates to arrive at SCI-CHESTER back 1998 when it opened. He never had any infractions in the time I've known him. Since his death in early November, about 7 other men too have lost their lives here, not all from the virus — two had possible heart attacks. There are two more friends of mine in the hospital: Leroy Ponzo, he is 54 or so, and he has been on a ventilator for over a month, and the word we received is they are waiting for his family to turn off the machine. And Tommy Perrin, one of my fellow dog handlers, they thought he was not going to make it! He has a lot of other things wrong with him medically, but he's fighting. He came off the ventilator and now he is on oxygen and talking, so hopefully he will be strong enough to beat this virus and get back to his little Chihuahua/Pug mix named Ms. Penny. Thankfully I am healthy. I don't know if I had the virus, not sure. My family is also healthy, thanks to God; my mother is 83, and no underlying conditions, but she is taking all precautions, the same with my daughter and granddaughter, who turned 2 back in September. So since October we have been on a modified lockdown. [end of first message]

We can only come out of our cells for 30 minutes at a time; some days you get out once and some days twice to take a shower, use the phone and kiosk. So, a whole lot of time spent in a cell; I have been doing a lot of stress eating, TV watching, and doing my laundry by hand — even gave myself a haircut. We don't know when things will get better here. But we don't want to experience another wave like we just went through. I was chosen to be a part of the Scandinavia Project here at SCI-Chester. 6 Lifers were selected back in March, and we moved to the unit on March 6th. I am thankful for being selected, and I had to make a choice: be in the program or pass and stay a Dog handler in the dog program. I chose the Scandinavia project. Then around

April or May I found myself really stressed out and feeling down and boxed-in like the walls were closing in on me. I had a lot going on during this time. In February I was granted a public hearing on my commutation application; then the hearing set for March was postponed until September, and I was stressing about that. I was really missing the dog program, and since nothing was going on, I asked to have a dog until our Scandinavia project started up. Big mistake: some staff got really pissed off at me and they wanted to throw me out of the program. During all this I am going through some mental stress and not knowing what's going to happen. I, like everyone else, have never been through a pandemic. I am worried about my family, with no power to do anything other than call everyday. So I knew if I had a dog to take care of, it would reduce my stressing and keep me busy training the dog. I trained 37 dogs here in the Wags at Chester dog program since April 2017. I believe this program was meant for me. I love dogs, always had one at home. I am still struggling with: do I want to stay in the Scandinavia project or go back to the dog program? All the dogs that were here were taken to other foster homes back in October. Don't know when we will get more. [end of second message]

I was so stressed out that night before my public hearing on September 3rd. I broke out with shingles, the worst pain I ever felt, about a week or so before the hearing. Then I have my hearing, and things go pretty good, but one of my former counselors whom I didn't have a good working relationship with put in a negative comment in my file saying that commutation was premature at this time and I was still a risk to the community. She has nothing to back this up with. I have not had an infraction since 1997; I have never been placed in restricted housing because of my actions. I have never been violent while incarcerated. Did every program asked of me and then some. So the only vote I received was from the Lt Governor Mr. Fetterman who complimented me on all my achievements and told me if I didn't receive commutation at this time to not be discouraged, that I am on the right path, and it's in my future. Easy for him to say — I was crushed. I try to not get my hopes up for these types of hearings, but it's hard not to. I been incarcerated for over 10,652 days: 29 years, two months. I have the Department of Corrections' support, The District Attorney's Office's support, family support, friends' support, multiple jobs promised; I am a licensed barber manager, dog trainer, and I have a lot of construction experience, and on top of all that, I have my victim's family's support. They have forgiven me, and for this I am totally humbled. So now I am working on a reconsideration. I have other staff who want to speak on my behalf, saying they would love for me to be the neighbor. I know I have grown tremendously since I first came to prison; my daughter was born 5 months after I came in, and ever since I have been being the best I can, so I can get home to her and now to my granddaughter and my mother, who is the best mom ever. I don't know what kind of effects this virus lockdown is having on me; I usually don't share my feelings with others. But I know one thing: I am ready for the vaccine.