

## Introduction

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**Julia Jarema:** Hi, I'm Julia.

**Kirsten Barber:** And I'm Kirsten!

**Julia:** And you're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

**Kirsten:** NCDPS is the largest department in the North Carolina state government with some amazing programs and resources...

**Julia:** ...as well as phenomenal personnel and volunteers.

**Kirsten:** Listen along as we take you behind the scenes and dive into how the people, programs and resources within this department enhance the safety of the people of North Carolina—give you the scoop, if you will, of all things NCDPS.

**Julia:** NCDPS's mission is to safeguard the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. As you listen to this podcast, we hope you'll learn something you may not have known about the ways the people of NCDPS are working to keep our state safe.

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## Season 1 Episode 10

**Pamela Walker:** Hello, and welcome to a special edition of the Safety Scoop, a podcast produced for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. I'm your guest host, Pamela Walker. I'm the NCDPS Communications Director. The North Carolina Department of Public Safety is the largest state cabinet agency in North Carolina with more than 26,000 law enforcement and civilian employees, plus another nearly 12,000 National Guard soldiers and airmen.

The first quarter of this year of 2020 has been an especially busy year for DPS with the department and its employees being heavily involved in preparation and response to the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is even more intense and complex for our state prisons. Joining us today to discuss some of the ways DPS has helped to protect and prepare North Carolinians during this unprecedented time is Commissioner of Prisons Todd Ishee and Deputy Commissioner Brandy Harris. We also have with us John Bull, one of our Communications Officers here, who has a primary role in providing

communications, media relations and many other hats supporting the state prison system. Thank you all for being here.

**D.C. Brandy Harris:** Thank you.

**Commr. Todd Ishee:** Thank you, Pam.

**Pam:** Let's jump right in. First, let me ask you, Commissioner Ishee, what are some of the things your leadership team and employees in our prisons are doing to stay safe and stop the spread?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, I'm going to give you kind of a high-level response, and then I know we're going to talk about this, uh, more in-depth as we—as we go through the podcast. Um, we're prepared for this. We have been preparing this for months. We've been preparing for this for years. The Division of Prisons has maintained a robust pandemic flu response plan for years. Um, we've been watching since—since the virus surfaced in China, and the minute that happened, we kicked it into high gear in terms of planning and preparing. Uh, you know, our efforts have kind of—kind of focused around—around three compartments. One is to prevent the virus from getting in the prison. One is if it gets in, we want to contain it very quickly, and the third is to stop the spread. You know, if it's in, we want to make sure that no one else or the least number of people are subjected to the virus.

We are working very, very closely with the governor's Coronavirus Task Force. We are following CDC guidelines. We are integrated with the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as we're part of the larger state emergency response effort. We, you know, a couple things that—that we've done which were big decisions for us, one was early on, we suspended visitation. And we know that visitation is critical to rehabilitation, critical to reentry, critical to prison safety, and it's very important to a majority of our offenders. So, that was something that we—that we did not take lightly, but it was something that had to be done in the name of—of safer prisons. Fairly early on, we also were faced with work release. You know, I'm very happy that we have a very robust work release program throughout the state. We're supporting local business. We are supporting really smooth transitions of—of offenders from prison to community. Uh, but we had to do that, too, and that was—that was not taken lightly but done to... Again, it fell right within our efforts to prevent, contain and stop the spread.

We're going to hear a lot through the podcast about cleaning, um, but we're asking our offenders and our staff to clean, clean, clean. And if it's clean, we clean it again. Um, that is c-critical for us to, uh, prevent, contain and stop the spread, so we are—we are becoming cleaning experts. We've done a lot—done a lot of things. I think the last report I saw is we've implemented over three dozen different measures to stop the spread and make our prisons safer. Uh, those can be found at [ncdps.gov](http://ncdps.gov) if anyone would like a more comprehensive, deep-dive look at—at what we have done, and the list changes almost every day. We are

adding, adding, adding as our—as our team works to—to navigate through this crisis.

**Pam:** And—and I know you have taken so many different actions, probably too many to sit here and—and go through every single one, so uh, w—we would just encourage folks to take time to look at [ncdps.gov](http://ncdps.gov) to see them all. You can find them under DPS Actions. And the website is updated regularly. So, where does the prisons stand right now regarding the coronavirus, i.e., such as how many positive results and—and—and situation with staff, etc.?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, as of today, we have 14 positive cases at three of our facilities. The facilities right now that are affected are Neuse Correctional, Caledonia Correctional and Johnston Correctional. Our healthcare team has—has been very aggressive, uh, with testing. I'm happy to report as of, uh, Friday morning at 10:00 a.m., we had 86 negative tests come back, uh, we had 23 that were pending and, as we said earlier, the 14 that have come back positive. Uh, for staff, uh, we do not have an official count. You know, that is—that is a matter that's between the employee and their health care provider. Uh, we're keeping a very close tab on that. We're very concerned about our staff that are ill, uh, but we have not, we are not, publishing public numbers on that.

**Pam:** And I'm sure you don't want those that have any kind of symptoms, whether or not it's COVID-related or not, coming to work sick, right?

**Commr. Ishee:** Absolutely. Uh, this is—this is a very unique situation, but you know, we're encouraging staff, if you do not feel good, don't come to work. You know, that's one of the ways, one of our strategies, to help control the spread is if somebody doesn't feel good, uh, we're asking them to stay home, get better and then come back, uh, once their physician has said, “Hey, it's safe for you to come back to work.”

**Pam:** Deputy Commissioner Harris, what happens when an offender exhibits symptoms consistent with the coronavirus?

**D.C. Harris:** Um, we are very aggressively and quickly removing them out of our general population and placing them in an isolated, um, cell, um, that is away from anyone else, um, in accordance with the CDC recommendations. We make sure they have a single room with a solid ba—solid door and a bathroom that they're able, um, to utilize until we're—we're able to confirm their symptoms.

**Pam:** You keep them in, um, the isolation status or quarantine status depending on the situation. Y—what—what happens next?

**D.C. Harris:** Um, at—t the point where we isolate 'em, we're pretty quickly getting, um, getting them tested to see if they have any, like, flu-like symptoms or if they pass a rapid flu test. And then from there, we move on to the COVID test, um, but we try to get them removed out of the general population as quick as possible.

**Pam:** Are there other—other types of, um, illness that—that comes up from time to time that you're fairly used to—to dealing with?

**D.C. Harris:** Um, yes, we, uh, each year, we deal with—with, um, flu outbreak. Um, that's something that occurs in the general population, and typically, um, the coronavirus and the flu is very similar. And we remove them and isolate them, um, until we're able to make sure that they're—they're not going to be able to spread it, when you're past that time frame where it was—it will not spread to the general population.

**Pam:** What steps are being taken to ensure that staff members are not coming to work sick. I know Commissioner Ishee touched on this earlier a little bit, but what can you expand on that a little bit more and—and what we're trying to do to avoid the virus being brought into the prison setting?

**D.C. Harris:** Um, we are currently, um, screening staff at all of our entry points of all of our facilities. Um, the screening criteria is based off of the CDC recommendations. Um, we—we are also taking your temperature. If their temperature, um, with a no-touch thermometer and at that point if their temperature is higher than 100, then we're asking them to, um, go and see their—their physician.

**Pam:** And—and—and if—if—if they do self-report any contact, um, w-what do you say to them? That's CDC guideline, right?

**D.C. Harris:** Yes. If we, um, if staff report, self-report that, um they have a positive test, we—we typically go backwards to see who all they have been in contact with, and we also notify the county—the county health department and the state health department.

**Pam:** All right. Commissioner Ishee, prison staffing was an issue before the arrival of the coronavirus. What additional steps are being taken to ensure that there are enough staff members to ensure that the public is safe and that offenders receive the care mandated by—to them by law?

**Commr. Ishee:** Prison staffing has been and—and continues to be a major challenge for us. Uh, you know, currently our—our vacancy rates are—are about 17—17% statewide, and we've also got a functional vacancy rate which is—is around 29%, and that takes into account staff that are off work for a number of reasons, are n—and are not in a duty-ready status. They may be a trainee. They may be serving our country in the military. Um, they may be having an extended illness. But staffing issues, uh, were a challenge; the coronavirus is—is making this worse. We are really being tested in this area.

But I guess, you know, the message that—that I want everybody to hear is that we are not going to operate a—a prison that is grossly understaffed. You know, the—the safety of our staff, the safety of the men and women who—who are in our custody outweighs everything else. We have a number of contingency plans

that—that are in place, and—and we are ready to, uh, act on those if—if we absolutely have to. You know, we can... There are strategies of—of temporarily moving staff or reassigning. Our staff are really good about this and—and do this routinely where we may have a need at a neighboring facility, and—and we ask staff to go over and help and they do, so, uh, we—we've been lucky to this point. You know, I hope that we don't have to—to dig into our contingency plans, uh, but if we have to, we will. You know, at this point, we're—we're thinking out 30, 60, 90 days out and—and wrestling with a number of what-if or worst-case scenarios, so if we need to, if we need to take measures to make sure that our staff are safe, we're prepared to do that.

**Pam:** So, the flow of offenders from the county jails has been halted, and offender transfers from one facility to another have all but stopped except for there are certainly a few exceptions, um, high-priority exceptions. Please explain how this works and why this is being done.

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, it was just another one of those decisions that—that we wrestled with and had to make. You know, stopping movement in a prison system as large as ours, uh, impacts all facets of the justice system here in North Carolina. It impacts our court system. It impacts local law enforcement. It impacts our—our county jails and the county sheriffs. Uh, so, this was not a—a decision that was made lightly, uh, but you know, I'm really happy to—to share that—that we worked, uh, in collaboration with the state's Sheriff's Association on this difficult issue, uh, because us stopping movement, uh, is putting an extra burden on—on the county jails, and we understand that, so, uh, we—the—what we did is supported by the Sheriff's Association, and we greatly appreciate that. Uh, but the reason why we did it, uh, was to cut down another big avenue of COVID-19 to get into our system or spread, so we've kind of—kind of done a—a shelter-in-place or a stay-at-home order for—for the prison system.

So, we do not have new inmates coming in from the, uh, county jails. We are not moving offenders from prison to prison. We—we have reserved the right to do a very extreme, uh, to deal with—with healthcare and court orders and extreme security situations, but for the most part, everybody's going to kind of—kind of stay put, and you know, we... This was made in con-consultation with our—our healthcare leadership team. We just feel that this is going to be a step that is going to slow the spread, and—and we're hoping that this is—is going to put a—put a major dent in any kind of progression of the virus. Um, you know, normally we're receiving about 450 offenders a week from the county jails and for—for any—any number of reasons, uh, but temp-temporarily for the next 14 days, this is—is—this has been halted.

**Pam:** And—and—and for the 14 days, is there any chance that that could be extended, or w-will you just have to evaluate?

**Commr. Ishee:** Uh, we're going to evaluate it really close. We hope that we don't have to because we know the burden that this is putting on the criminal justice system in North Carolina, uh, but if it means, uh, making—making things safer, uh, for

everyone, you know, we're—we're prepared to do that. And kind of along with that is—is we're modifying operations within the prisons, uh, so a day in the life of an average offender is—very much different now where we've kind of created small groupings or cohorts of—of offenders and their day is spent together. So, we've tried to do what we can to limit mixing, uh, different groupings so that if there is—is a virus present, the, uh, infection spread will be just to a small group instead of to the larger population and—and to our staff. You know, that's—that's the other important thing that—that came out of this is—is, you know, we've got—we've got many staff that are coming to work, working in facilities where we know the rate of spread is potentially much greater than it is in the community. Um, is, our staff safety, was—was a priority in making this decision.

**Pam:** And—and—and you're doing a lot to make sure that your staff know what's going on, correct? I mean, how—how are staff and those under our supervision, how are they receiving information about the current situation?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, I—I think, you know, communication is our—is our best defense in this war against the coronavirus. You know, these are unprecedented times. Uh, we have not seen a pandemic like this in—in over 100 years. Communication is one of our most powerful tools. We've got to make sure that our staff and our offenders are—are educated, you know, know—know the signs and the symptoms and how can we slow or mitigate the spread. Uh, we—we've got a great team in the—in the—at the division and region level that are in communication with our wardens almost every day. Uh, I think that's helping.

We've got, uh, you know, our incident command system is running—running very well, and has done a great job in helping—helping manage things. You know, we've—we're just encouraging people to talk to one another. We need staff to talk to staff. We need staff to talk to our offenders. We've done town hall meetings, uh, throughout the system. Uh, so, communications: if we're going to make our way through this, I think communications is going to be one of our key ingredients to successfully returning back to the lives that—that we all are used to living.

**Pam:** Right. Switching gears a little bit, um, Deputy Commissioner, please provide us some information on the distribution of masks and face shields, gloves and gowns, that—that protective gear for our—our staff and—and the offenders.

**D.C. Harris:** Um, on the onset of the coronavirus epidemic, we started to... We did right away. We did, uh, an inclusive list of every, um, facility, inventory so that we knew exactly what we had on hand if we needed to be able to pass it around and—and take care of one another. Um, we have, um, we have Correction Enterprise is making masks and face shields, um, for, uh, staff and offenders. Um, they also are making the hospital, like, style gowns and as well as the washable face masks. Um, in addition to that, we have N-95s that's available and surgical masks that's available for staff. Um, all staff and every offender, our goal is to have them, um, issued a face mask within the next week.

Um, we have been prioritizing the facilities that have a positive, um, COVID test. Um, all of the inmates and all of the staff at these facilities have face masks. Um, in addition to that, we have also, um, provided masks for the diagnostic centers, and then the next phase is to make sure we give 'em to those that have the chronic care, um, patients, uh, as well. From there, uh, our goal is to make sure that every facility has masks available, um, h-have masks actually issued to the staff and the inmates.

**Pam:** And that is so important for people to understand is that we did not have all this equipment, protective gear immediately on hand and at the ready, and that's it—it's we are not alone in the national situation where everybody is—is just searching and trying to order and get in this type of—this type of protective gear. So, I know, too, that, um, the help that we're getting from Correction Enterprises and them to be able to produce it for—for our system is—is so incredibly important.

**D.C. Harris:** It is. It's been the backbone of a lot of the, um, things we have put in place. Correction Enterprise has served as our backbone to keep us moving in that direction in providing PPE and mitigating, um, coronavirus.

**Pam:** I have to ask, have you heard from any of the employees at Correction Enterprises or any of the—the offenders there are part of that—part of the process? They—they've got to feel like they're doing something to help, yes?

**D.C. Harris:** I have, and they do feel like they're doing something to help, and they're actually been very excited about it. I got a chance to visit the meat plant at Harnett Correctional Institution, and it was the day where they were, um, providing each facility with a 14-day food supply, and they were excited that they were able to do that as well as they were also preparing for the long term of a 90-day supply of food, um, being brought in. So, um, everybody that I walked through was very, uh, excited and just felt that they were part of the mission. Um, they—they felt a connection to the mission of what we are doing, um, statewide.

**Pam:** That's great. Also, I have to ask you, too, about work release and—and some of the programming that has ceased or been reduced. Can you speak about what Correction Enterprises has done to provide the disinfectants, hand cleaners, antibacterial soaps, cloth masks, face shields and gowns? Can you expand on that a little bit?

**D.C. Harris:** Yes. Um, as of Sunday, Correction Enterprise, um, manufactured about 15,000 reusable cloths. Um, they have 10,000 have been shipped out. An additional 5,000, um, was sent out on Monday. They've really been working hard. They added additional hours to most of the plants, um, so that they can be able to provide and—and meet the needs of our agency. Um, they have pra—manufactured 2,000+ masks for offenders and an additional 20,000 they're working on. Um we will continue to manufacture offender masks until there is

enough to where we can give each offender two, so as we're washing one, we can... They'll still have protection.

Um, Correction Enterprise is also, uh, producing non-alcohol, um, hand sanitizer that's available that does, um, work and kill the coronavirus. Um, plants all across has increased their production hours, and, um, we also, um, increased our production of soap. Um, we are providing, uh, two bars of soap per week to every offender, um, statewide. Um, Correction Enterprise has also increased the, uh, liquid anti-antibacterial hand soap. Um, they're producing 12-1,200 cases a week. They increased their production by 16 hours just to help meet our needs, uh, at the, uh, at the chemical plant. Um, and we—we are currently producing about, as the commissioner said earlier, about 1,100 cases a day of disinfectant, so Correction Enterprises has really been the backbone to our response.

**Pam:** And in helping keep things as clean as we possibly can.

**D.C. Harris:** Mmm-hmm.

**Pam:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Um, so, um, also, can you—since we're talking about Correction Enterprises—can you speak to the day-to-day operations in prisons and—and the job skills and—and other things that are of a benefit, in addition to all the cleanliness and hygiene and everything? There, you know, there's—there's so much more that goes along with that. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**D.C. Harris:** Well, as I stated, Correction Enterprise has really been the backbone to our preparedness and in—in our response, um, to the COVID, uh, pandemic. Um, Correction Enterprises gives people, uh, the offenders that work for them, the opportunity to gain real-world, real work skills that transfer right into society. This is a, um, really good, um, operation that we have. They are producing safety equipment. They're producing janitorial cleaning goods. They're producing food. Um, they are producing furniture. Uh, we have a huge, robust Corrections Enterprises, and I'm very proud of the work that they do.

**Pam:** And it's got to also help them with their social skills and—and just, um, in having a sense of responsibility, being in charge of something.

**D.C. Harris:** It does, and I think that the—when they get to see their products being used because they are part of making a product, and then they're part of—some are part of delivery of the product, and then that application of using a product, and I think to see that entire process is a huge benefit, and it just shows success. So, um, I think it's, uh, Correction Enterprises has just really been, uh, the backbone to everything we've been doing.

**Pam:** Commissioner Ishee, please speak about the importance of your staff in the facilities during these extraordinary times. I mean it... I-I've never seen anything

like it. I don't know; you've had a long career in corrections. Have you ever seen anything like this?

**Commr. Ishee:** I haven't. You know, I've—I've been in the business now for 30 years and have, uh, had the good fortune of traveling the country. I've been in hundreds of prisons and jails throughout the United States, and you know, our staff for our focal point. I think they're nothing short of heroes. I think they're part of the army of heroes in North Carolina that are working to every day around the clock to battle COVID-19. You know, our staff are—are giving above and beyond what—what we normally would ask of them.

And, you know, I want to—I don't want to single anybody out, but, you know, we've talked about our Enterprise team, and we've got a enormous custody team, and we've got a outstanding healthcare team, and we've got programs staff and support staff and our facility maintenance professionals. We've got great division level staff and region staff. I just, I can't talk enough about how they are managing and navigating, uh, through this pandemic. Uh, you know, we—we're asking them to work hard, uh, in—in the face of—of a pandemic that, you know, is outside the—the—the prison fences, and they've got stresses and fears and concerns, uh, outside of work as well that—that they're trying to—to manage at the same time. Uh, but you know, they're answering the call. I think our staff are—are selfless. They're providing great service to the state of North Carolina. In the name of public safety, you know, they—they've come to work. They're doing their jobs. They're professional, courageous, you know, I could—I could go on and on, um.

**Pam:** And—and their jobs are challenging at the best of times, yes? Do y'all agree?

**D.C. Harris:** I agree.

**Pam:** Yeah. So, um, to—to be—to have all this additional on them right now, um, I—I—I think you're absolutely right. They're heroes.

**Commr. Ishee:** You know, I think that's a great point, you know, that—that we don't often talk about is how hard it is to work in—in prisons, aside from COVID-19. You know, our—our staff face challenges and danger and—and you name it, every day. You know, working in the prison system is a very unique profession, and it's—it's very... It's not for everybody, and—and our—our chosen few, our 16,000, do a great job. And—and with this pandemic on top of it, I don't know how we can ever thank them enough for the service that they're providing. And you know, we're going to get through this, one way or another. We're going to get through this. It may get worse before it gets better, uh, but I tell our staff every day, you know, we're going to come out of this, and—and we're going to learn from it, uh, but...

**D.C. Harris:** And I don't know if you want to add in that we have followed, you know, the CDC guidelines and, you know, with following the CDC guidelines, we also have to look at the CDC guidelines and compared to the critical basic needs of

running the facility and making—making it work, um, combining both of those: the CDC guidelines as well as the security, um, aspects of the facility and bringing those both together, bridging those, meshing them.

**Commr. Ishee:** Yeah, I think that's—that's an important note that it's a challenge, you know. Our—our prisons were not built with social distancing in mind, and so we are—we are adapting and following the CDC guidelines in some facilities that are old and date back to the 1930s or—in some cases, uh, before that. Um, but you know, we're dealing with densely, uh, populated buildings, and you know, again, the prison staff are being creative. Uh, they're—they're finding ways to adapt and apply these health guidelines so that we can be safer.

**Pam:** Right, and—and you—you t-touched on it some, but this—this type job, this profession, this career, it matters. Talk a little bit more about the commitment that people are putting in.

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, you know, I think it's a—I think it's a calling, you know. Public service is a—is a calling. And being a public servant in a—a prison system is even—even a more unique calling. Eh, you know, and this, the coronavirus, is challenging us, and our staff are responding. And they're choosing to come to work in—in the face of personal danger, personal risk, we've still got staff that are coming through the gates every day, day in and day out and—and staring this danger down in the name of something bigger than ourselves, in the name of having a safe North Carolina. And you know, I don't know that—that there's any way to commend or thank—thank our staff enough for the sacrifice and the bravery that they're exhibiting.

**Pam:** So, I just want to say, “thank you” again. I know you're both just beyond busy right now. It's an incredibly busy time. It's an incredibly challenging time, and I just want to say, “thank you” again for taking time out to explain and giving people a little bit more of a peek behind the walls in—in what we're doing and—and the commitment that—that everybody has to trying to help keep our—our community safe, our internal community safe. That includes both the employees and those that are under our care, and in addition, everybody is trying to stay safe and stop the spread. Thank you both again.

**Both:** Thank you.

## **Conclusion**

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**Kirsten:** Thanks for listening to this episode of the Safety Scoop. To learn more about NCDPS, go to [ncdps.gov](http://ncdps.gov). Tune in next time on your favorite podcast app to hear more behind-the-scenes stories from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

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