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## **Another COVID-19 Outbreak at the Alamance County Jail Prompts Bail Reform Conversation**

BY [CAROLINIANWEB](#) on [MARCH 2, 2021](#) · ( 1 )

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*Editor*

ALAMANCE COUNTY, N.C. — Another COVID-19 outbreak was discovered February 6th at the Alamance County Jail after a larger outbreak last year that prompted bail reform protests.

According to the Sheriff's Office, one inmate and two employees have tested positive for COVID-19. The NC Department of Health and Human Services defines an outbreak as two or more confirmed cases in a period of 28 days within a congregate living or long-term care facility.

Sheriff Terry Johnson said, "Our office will continue to work closely with the Alamance County Health Department and will follow all recommendations in order to limit the spread of COVID-19 within our Detention Center. As of now, our one inmate and two staff members who contracted the virus are doing well, but we will continue to pray for their recovery."

There was a previous outbreak at the facility after an initial case in August and a larger spread in September. The NC DHHS reported that those outbreaks were much larger, building up to 123 cases at their height in September. 113 of those cases were inmates. Meaning that at least 1 out of every 4 inmates in the Alamance County Jail were infected at the time.

The September outbreak drew public criticism of the Sheriff's Office for not testing the 53 inmates who suffered from COVID-19 symptoms before the outbreak was discovered. Capt. Travis Hackey with the Sheriff's Office said that people being booked were tested, but never the inmates already in jail with symptoms.

The current outbreak has raised concerns from activist group Down Home North Carolina, who are collecting donations for another bail fund to get prisoners awaiting trial released. At time of reporting, they have collected nearly \$2500 of their \$5000 goal.

This outbreak comes as trials for people arrested during the Graham protests last year are ongoing. Some of those protests came in the wake of the September outbreak, when activists advocated for prisoners awaiting trial who could not post bail to be released on recognizance.

Across the country, similar conversations have been happening as many activists are pursuing bail reform. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, over 555,000 of the 2.3 million people detained in the U.S. haven't been convicted or sentenced.

Local bail reform activists had a victory in May last year, when the American Civil Liberties Union was able to get many of Alamance County's bail policies updated. The updates came as part of a lawsuit against the county's courts and Sheriff's Office.

ACLU lead counsel Leah Kang wrote, "Under the previous practices, people who were arrested in Alamance County were not guaranteed a prompt bail hearing before a judge, were not given an individualized inquiry into their ability-to-pay, and were not provided counsel."



PC: "Alamance County Jail Protest (2020 Sept)" by Anthony Crider is licensed under CC BY 2.0

However, at the time Down Home North Carolina pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason to further push criminal justice reform. According to spokesperson Gwen Frisbie-Fulton, the group advocates for policies that reduce the jail population such as minimal use of cash bail along with not issuing arrest warrants for low-level offenses and probation violations.

As activists call for a reduction in the jail population, and concerns over the Sheriff's Offices COVID-19 safety precautions are once again raised — the county commissioners have been considering removing the jail's exercise yard to add more beds.

The commissioners voted 5 – 0 against the measure, citing the cost as the only prohibiting factor. Anne Cassebaum, a retired Elon University professor, said “This does not seem like the time for expansion.” She cited cash bail reform, controversial detention of immigrants, and the effect of having no outdoor exercise area for inmates.

The county commissioners continue to look for an architectural firm that can complete the project on a tighter budget.

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