

# Rep. Scott Campbell

## *St. Johnsbury And The DOC Surge*

I have been following closely developments around the “surge” of covid-positive inmates at St. Johnsbury’s Northeast Correctional Complex. Since the transfer of inmates last Thursday, I have attended the Governor’s and Administration officials’ press conferences Friday and Monday, and two Zoom meetings with Dept of Corrections staff, local legislators and townspeople.

I have also written to the Governor’s office, Agency of Human Services Secretary Mike Smith and DOC Interim Commissioner Jim Baker, posted information online and responded to residents individually.

Last evening the St. Johnsbury Select Board met on Zoom with Commissioner Jim Baker and Facilities Executive Al Cormier. As this is an issue of major concern to the community, I believe it’s worth sharing my take-aways from the meeting.

Mr. Baker started with AHS’s planning parameters (where DOC is housed). He said, first, they have been following the best medical advice of Health Commissioner Mark Levine and the Centers for Disease Control. Further, their priority has been to avoid having inmates take resources needed by host communities.

If inmates test positive for the virus, best medical advice is to iso-

late them from the rest of the prison population. They selected St. Johnsbury for that isolation based on its physical layout (two separate buildings), mechanicals (three separate air-handling systems), low population, and staffing.

Mr. Baker noted that there are several other surge facilities for homeless and other populations in other parts of the state, including Burlington and Rutland.

The sudden discovery of 32 positive inmates after universal testing at the St. Albans facility last Thursday forced sudden implementation of the plan. Again last night, they acknowledged poor communication and vowed to do better.

Mr. Cormier reviewed protocols implemented at St. J’s NECC: physical separation of “warm” zones and “hot” zones; a decontamination tent; staff training in decon techniques; and best-practice personal protective equipment. St. Johnsbury Fire Chief and Town Health Officer Jon Bouffard has reviewed the protocols and found them adequate; he is scheduled to tour NECC Tuesday (4/14).

Mr. Baker reiterated the commitment made in the weekend DOC press release to transport any inmates needing hospitalization to UVM-



MC, not NVRH. Remote “tele-medicine” consult is being set up to assess need to transport. DOC will contract with an outside entity for transportation, perhaps the National Guard. CALEX

CEO Michael Wright, also in attendance, noted that until such arrangements are finalized, any inmates needing transport would be handled by CALEX and taken to the nearest hospital, i.e., NVRH.

I asked about plans in case 100 or 150 more inmates test positive in the coming weeks. Mr. Baker said NECC is staffed and equipped for up to 53 inmates. The plan beyond that is to keep as many as possible in their current facility, though he didn’t share exact numbers. They are still in the planning stage in case the covid-positive inmate population overwhelms capacities.

Mr. Baker also addressed staff leaving the facility after their shifts. The decon protocols offer as much as assurance as possible that they will not be bringing the virus with them. (Other workers such as health care and grocery clerks also run this risk and may be following less rigorous protocols.) DOC is renting several rooms at Comfort Inn and is providing DOC staff so that hotel staff does not interact with correctional work-

ers. Vacated rooms are left vacant for 5 days prior to thorough cleaning.

The meeting left me with a high degree of confidence that DOC, AHS, and Dept of Health are working in good faith and with the best knowledge possible in this unprecedented crisis.

This is not a matter of St. Johnsbury being a “dumping ground.” Such a narrative is not only counterproductive, it is self-destructive, in my view. It reveals a defeatist attitude that holds us back from celebrating what is uniquely great about St. Johnsbury and the NEK. We must advocate for the resources we need, but we must not shirk our duty to do our part.

The Administration and career agency staff have done a remarkable job adapting to and meeting the ever-shifting demands of the pandemic. The Legislature too has come together, regardless of party, to address the needs of our State.

The crisis is far from over. For all of us, this is a time of testing. What kind of society are we? What do we value most? How do we take care of each other? How each of us answers will have repercussions for many years to come.

*Rep. Scott Campbell serves St. Johnsbury in the Vermont House of Representatives.*