

## Introduction

**Julia Jarema:** Hi, welcome to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. There are great people, programs and resources within this department. In each episode of the Safety Scoop, we'll share how NCDPS employees prevent, protect and prepare North Carolinians and help enhance safety in our state. We hope you'll listen along and learn something you may not have known about the largest state agency in North Carolina.

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**Julia:** 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 12

**Julia:** Today on Safety Scoop, we're talking about challenges and changes in North Carolina's prisons operations, both during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as what comes next. Joining us today is Todd Ishee, the Commissioner of Prisons for North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Commissioner Ishee has been a guest on the podcast several times before since he joined Department of Public Safety in the summer of 2019. Obviously, this has been an especially busy and challenging year for the Department of Public Safety as much as our agency is involved in leading North Carolina's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

While the department and its employees are heavily involved in preparation and response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation is even more intense and complex for our state prisons. Today on Safety Scoop, we'll hear about the latest challenges battling the coronavirus in our state prisons, and we'll spend some time talking about what comes afterwards and what a post-pandemic future holds for the operations of our state prison. So, welcome, Todd!

**Commr. Todd Ishee:** Well, thank you.

**Julia:** Well, let's start off by talking about some of what's been going on in North Carolina prisons because, as we've said, obviously there's been a lot of challenges this year. Tell us about some of the biggest challenges our prison system has faced. I mean, obviously we've had to test inmates and staff. Um, tell us a little bit about what's been going on and how you protected the prison population.

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, we are being challenged every day, to say the least. You know, our prison staff have incredibly difficult jobs every day of the week. You know, this profession and working inside a prison is not for everybody, and our—our staff are really a rare commodity, but they're getting the job done amidst all these challenges, and covid-19 really has made everyone's job that much tougher. Some of the things that we are working on... First, I'll touch on, uh, staff testing, and we now have a multi-tier approach to staff testing. We have a partnership with FastMed where our staff can sign up and be COVID tested as often as they want to or as often as they feel like they need to free of charge. It's a partnership with the, um, state health plan, and that's available through December 31st.

Recently, we also added a staff testing program where we have tested all of our staff at about 15 of our prisons, and thankfully our staff have been fairly healthy. We have had a few that—that have been positive, but overall, the—the results have yielded good results, uh, for our staff. And beginning next Monday, we are going to implement a testing program where we will randomly test 5% of our prison staff at each of our 55 prisons across the state, and we're also going to include our prison facilities, so we're going to include our staff at the Randall Building and within our region offices. So, that will yield 20% of our staff every month will be tested, and this is really all being done to help make our work environments as safe as we can get them for our staff and the offenders that live inside our prisons.

**Julia:** So, you mentioned randomly testing 5% of the staff. Is that on a daily basis, a weekly basis? How often are you doing that?

**Commr. Ishee:** 5% once a week, and then, you know, we will react to the results. If—if results come back and several staff are positive, you know, we may exceed that 5% and do kind of a deeper dive depending what—what's indicated and recommended by our health care team.

**Julia:** What about testing offenders? I know that you have done some testing of offenders. Can you tell us a little bit about that? Have all offenders been tested or only those who are showing symptoms, or how have you approached that?

**Commr. Ishee:** Sure, I, you know, our approach has changed since the beginning of the virus. We, like the rest of the world, has learned, and our testing approach and strategies have changed based on those lessons learned. This summer, we tested every offender throughout the prison system. It was a mass testing effort that was supported by our partners from the National Guard and also by our healthcare team within prisons. But every offender was tested, and those results came back at about a 2.1 positivity rate. So, based on the level of infection across our state, we were pleased with those results. Since then, testing efforts have grown to where now we are testing approximately 10,000 offenders each month. So, in a 90-day period, we are almost doing a complete mass testing effort of the offenders.

**Julia:** What happens if there's an offender who says, "I feel like I'm positive, and I want to be tested." Can that offender be tested? How does that work?

**Commr. Ishee:** They are immediately sent to the, uh, healthcare unit and screened by our healthcare team, and tests are—administered based on recommendations and decisions by our physicians.

**Kirsten:** At the beginning of the pandemic, prisons made a shift on visitation and set up some guidelines within the facilities to protect staff and the offender population. What has happened throughout the pandemic with visitation and people coming in and out of prison facilities for the different programs, and how have families been updated with these, uh, different guidelines and strategies?

**Commr. Ishee:** Early on in the pandemic, uh, we had to make a decision to suspend visitors and volunteers, and that was not an—an easy decision because visitation and our partner volunteers play a critical role in prison safety and the rehabilitative process and ultimately public safety across our state. But the virus spread required that. I'm happy to share that recently we have, uh, reinstated visitation on a kind of new normal and limited basis where families can come to our facilities, providing they are not on red status and have a no-contact visiting opportunity. We've given our wardens discretion to determine how long the visits are, how many they are, but it's been a very welcome reinstatement by both our offender population and the families that support them throughout their period of—of incarceration.

We have not been able to reopen our doors to our—our volunteer partners yet, but we look forward to the day when we can safely do that. But we know that we're going to get through this pandemic at some point and are—and are looking forward to the day where we can welcome back in our—our volunteers and contractors and just army of supporters that help make our prison system as safe as and productive as it can be.

- Kirsten:** The Department of Public Safety has phenomenal correctional staff at all of our facilities. Can you take us through how, um, staffing has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Commr. Ishee:** Well, I can tell you COVID-19 is challenging our staff and challenging our staffing levels. You know, right now we are averaging just over 200 of our prison staff across the state are out battling COVID-19 themselves or with their families. That's on top of a prison system that has a staffing challenge before COVID. We are running at about a 30% functional vacancy rate, so this extra is on top. So, we've got a number of staff that are sick and battling the virus and just ask that everyone keep them and their families in their—in their thoughts and prayers because we have some staff that are—that are—are very sick as a result of that. And you know, also wanted to mention that—that we have lost some staff, some *heroes*, during this pandemic, and we will continue to, uh, to mourn their departure from our teams and from their families.
- Julia:** So, you mentioned there's 200 staff and that sounds, I mean obviously that's a large number of staff. I realize that it's a—a very small percentage considering how many employees we have, but yes, um, to your point, it has definitely impacted a lot of the facilities and hit prisons at a very difficult time already.
- Todd, tell us a little bit about Extending Limits of Confinement Program. I know earlier this year, this spring, Secretary Hooks implemented, um, the program based on his authority in which this program, in essence, allows some offenders to finish serving the rest of their sentence outside of the prison facility. Tell us a little bit about why we chose to implement that program and what has happened with the program. Kind of give us an overall sense of what's been going on with that.
- Commr. Ishee:** Like COVID, the—the program is evolving. It's really designed to decrease density in our prisons and then across the prison system. Prisons are densely populated, small kind of cities, and the ELC program allows us to transition some offenders from the physical custody of inside of prison to supervision by our community corrections team. We think that—that we've done a good job with it at this point. We are safely accomplishing our goal and look forward to—to evaluating more and more inmates to be part of this ELC program as it—as it moves forward.
- Julia:** Just to clarify, they are not ending their term sooner. They're just physically not housed in—within the prison.
- Commr. Ishee:** Yes, they're continuing to serve their sentence, just in a different type of way, but they will all serve, uh, the full sentence as indicated by law.
- Julia:** Commissioner Ishee, is there anything else that—that you want to tell our audience about prison operations during COVID? We know this has been an extremely difficult time and—and that our prison systems are learning just like

everybody else in our society is learning. Um, are there any other points that I didn't mention?

**Commr. Ishee:**

The safety of our staff and our offenders is every day our top priority, and as you said, we are continuing to learn about how to mitigate and slow the spread of this virus. Recently, we've issued six cloth, three-ply face masks to all of our staff and all of our offenders, so that was a significant safety enhancement that we think is going to, uh, impact the virus spread in a positive manner. Within the last week, we've also made N-95 or KN-95 masks available to all our staff that would like that. In the early phases of the pandemic, the shortage of PPE was a challenge for us just to acquire, and we've strategically built that to a point now where all of our staff who would like that mask that offers the highest level of protection, they can get those and have those issued to us so that they can be as safe as they can while they're doing their job. The three W's, the wash, the wear and the wait, is an everyday stressor that—that we try to—to reinforce with our staff and offenders to wash their hands, to wear their—their masks at all times and to appropriately social distance.

You know, our prison system now is kind of operating under a new normal. We are... Every prison is cohorting offenders, and uh, that's very much different than what normal, pre-COVID prison life was like. A couple new things on the—on the, uh, horizon we are working on actively right now is—is a focus on protecting the vulnerable offender population and moving them from a dormitory setting where—where they—they would be maybe a little bit more vulnerable, into a single-cell environment where they have their own sink, own toilet and a—a solid door to help to protect our men and women who may have underlying health conditions. We are actively pursuing purchase of new safety technology and look forward to the day when we can make those announcements, but we are positioning to, um, spend significant money on safety-enhancing technology that will help us battle the, uh, spread of the virus.

And I think, like most of us, we're looking forward to the day when a vaccine becomes available, and we've recently learned that our prison staff and our prison offenders will be offered the immunization or the vaccine, uh, very on—very early on in the rollout for the rollout phases for the state of North Carolina. You know, our staff are resilient, and they're doing a great job. We are battling COVID fatigue, both with our staff and offenders, uh, but you know, we've got some incredibly committed and hardworking staff. We're go—we're going to get through this virus and look forward to the day when we can—can move past it and turn to, uh, normal, or at least the new normal prison operations.

**Julia:**

Great. Thank you for sharing that.

**Kirsten:**

Commissioner Ishee, one of the things you and your leadership team has done is to create a five-year strategic plan. Can you take our audience through what a strategic plan is and how you and your team created what you have now?

**Commr. Ishee:** This is a very exciting thing for me to talk about. You know our—our strategic plan is going to be our beacon. It's going to be our—our road map for the next five years, and you know, I think the thing that makes our strategic plan here in North Carolina unique is how it came to be. We had 500 staff from—from across the division, and we had every prison represented, many—every one of our regional offices represented. We had correction officers and sergeants and captains, lieutenants, unit managers, uh, laundry staff, healthcare staff, correction enterprise, our maintenance professionals. We had everybody, and all those minds and all that, you know, we had thousands and thousands of years of corrections experience that got to contribute, and you know, this plan is for our staff, but it—but it was created by our staff. So, I think that's really what makes our plan so unique and so special.

**Julia:** That's interesting. So, that sounds like you had a ton of buy-in and really had broad-reaching input from everybody in the corrections staff. Tell us what's in the plan. What's the purpose of the plan?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, our plan is loaded to say the least, and it's very aggressive. You know, sometimes I have jokingly said, "We call it a five-year plan, but it may in fact be a seven- or eight-year plan." So, we've got a lot of work to do, but you know, we were very intentional about doing that. You know, I think if—if we are going to impact, uh, safety and—and be good stewards for the state and North Carolina, we owe it to everybody to, uh, to be aggressive in just this reimagining how—how our prison system is going to, uh, look and run in the future. So, it's guided by a brand-new set of core values, a brand-new mission statement and a brand new vision statement, and then that's going to really kind of guide who we are and what we're going to do and where we're going.

You know, some of the key elements of the plan are, uh, goal number one is safety. And you know, that is our responsibility to the, uh, citizens of North Carolina but also to our staff and to the offenders who are sentenced to our custody. So, we've got a number of goals around safety and reducing violence and better managing our prison gangs who are usually at the root of bad things when they do happen across our prison system. Safety is—is our priority, and making the work environment as safe as we possibly can for our staff is of paramount importance.

Uh, we're going to tackle technology. Technology is an area where we have a—a lot of work to do, and to be honest with you, a lot of—a lot of money needs to be spent to elevate our level of technology. And if we do that, you know, we're going to be able to communicate better. We're going to be safer. So, we've got some aggressive goals on technology.

**Julia:** So, Commissioner Ishee, give us some examples of the technology that you hope to implement and why you think that that's so critical.

**Commr. Ishee:** One of the key safety technologies I think that has *got* to be implemented as we move forward is a—is a communication system both with improving our—our

radios, which we rely on heavily, and also working toward a location-based “man down” alarm system. You know, when our staff need help, we need to know exactly where they're at, so that we can respond and help them in wh—in whatever way they need. But that's something we don't have that I think is—is—is critical, uh, to us moving forward.

**Julia:** So, there are other types of technology in addition to, um, some of those communication systems improvements?

**Commr. Ishee:** Sure, and you know, technology is really broad. It goes beyond just security devices. Uh, an example: many of our staff don't have email addresses right now, and that is really a challenge for us in terms of communication. So, that's something we—we've got to fix. Video visitation and, uh, video court hearings is something that we hope to positively impact. We've already started our video visitation program and look forward to a continued rollout. Really just a wireless kind of infrastructure, uh, that we don't have throughout the prison system that, you know, we really rely heavily on in—in our lives. We hope to see the prison system go there, and—and we think we've got a vehicle to, uh, to move us in that direction.

**Julia:** So, it sounds like, um, I'm not sure if COVID has had this impact on prisons as well. I know for many other segments of the population, we've had to sort of spring forward with what we were planning on doing technology-wise and to exist and to continue to thrive and succeed in our current pandemic state, and it sounds like prisons is no different.

**Commr. Ishee:** Yes, it is. We—we've been able to move forward faster in some—some respects, and I guess that's one of the good things that COVID-19 has brought us.

**Kirsten:** How does the strategic plan address recidivism within the offender population?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, reducing recidivism is, really from a high level, it—it's one of our key report card items. That's really... If we're impacting recidivism rates positively, crime rates in our communities are going to go down, so if I have a report card, reducing recidivism is on that and we've got an entire section of the strategic plan dedicated toward that and—and evidence based programming and really just enhancing our programmatic efforts because that—that is a necessary part of reducing, uh, the recidivism rates is—is equipping our offenders with skills to, uh, leave prison with and—and apply to life and help enable them not to reoffend and return.

**Julia:** Commissioner, sure can you tell us a little bit about, um, anything in the strategic plan that deals with staff. Obviously, you mentioned earlier that there's some staff shortages, and I know that's something that's not unique to North Carolina's prison system but is something that prison systems across the country struggle with. What elements within the—the strategic plan deal with that?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, thanks for asking. You know, we've got a huge section of the plan is dedicated toward our staff, dedicated to increasing our recruitment efforts, because as we discussed earlier, we're short staffed. For those that don't work for us, we are hiring, and we want to hear from you because we've got a lot of different job and career opportunities that I think appeal to a number of different folks across the country. Staff retention, right; we have got to improve our retention rate by really, I think, improving quality of life for our staff, so you will see a whole number of strategies that are really dedicated to making the work life for our staff better, uh, so that they feel valued, feel part of a team. And we recognize them for the service and accomplishments that they are providing the state of North Carolina and the Department of Public Safety.

**Julia:** Can you give us some examples of some of those?

**Commr. Ishee:** One of the lead examples is a step pay plan for our staff. This is something that—we heard very, very loud and clear, that we need a—a step pay plan that—that kind of says that, you know, we want you to be a career professional with the Department of Public Safety, and you will get rewarded for years of continuous service with the—with the Department of Public Safety. So, when we say “step,” that means staff would receive a—an increase in salary at different marks in their—in their service career. But I think it—it really, everything we do kind of anchors around that. There's a lot of other things, but our need for a step pay plan is very strong. We hope to push that ball over the—over the goal line and get—get our staff a very, very much earned and deserved step pay plan.

**Julia:** I know North Carolina has a large prison population. We also, I believe, have an aging prison population. Uh, are there any parts in the strategic plan that deal with healthcare concerns for our prison population?

**Commr. Ishee:** Yes, we have—we've got an entire section on, uh, health services, and you know, it's—it's a high need area for us. Our health services funding line has not been increased in—in a number of years, and we've got a lot of—of work to do to really just to continue to evolve and grow our delivery of health services so that we stay consistent with community standards of care. And—and we look forward to digging into health services. You know, there's—there's really a couple exciting things. Um, one is our telehealth initiative, and that's currently underway, and I think it is going to have huge return on—on investment for us. It's going to save us money, uh, make us more efficient. We're going to be able to provide, uh, much quicker access for our offenders to specialty healthcare clinics, and it's also going to improve security. Right now, we—we typically have significant numbers of offender transports that leave the prisons every day and go to a medical facility. We think those are going to be reduced, uh, significantly which will keep our correction officers in the prisons where they're very much needed, so I'm really excited about the telehealth. It—it's going to take some time to grow, but the, uh, the seeds are planted and things are moving forward, and I think we've got, uh, big things to look forward to with our—our telehealth initiative.



**Kirsten:** And take us through what the overall goal is. Are there any parts of the strategic plan that are already underway or have started rolling?

**Commr. Ishee:** You know, a couple that—come to mind to highlight that I think are going to be game changers in terms of safety and in terms of our responsibility to, uh, rehabilitate our offenders. First is an incentive award time program where, uh, we've put in place that the offender population can earn sentence reduction credits for good behavior. This program has been in place now for almost six months, and we are seeing just over two-thirds of the offender population are qualifying, so, uh, we are seeing a definite downward trend in rule violations and violence and all those bad things. Uh, it's really kind of a win-win because our prisons are—becoming safer, and it's also an opportunity for the offenders to earn through good behavior the ability to, uh, return to their families sooner than they may have done otherwise. So again, this—this program is early, uh, but we're seeing some very promising signs that this is going to, uh, be a high impact item.

You know, probably the other one that—that I want to spend just a little bit of time on is our tablet program. And, uh, this is not new to corrections. There are a number of states that, uh, have it in place already, but it's new to North Carolina, and we're very excited about that. We have partnered with—with a vendor and are working toward the day where each offender will be issued a tablet, kind of an iPad type device, where they can take programs and take educational programs and—other rehabilitative programs right on there. The tablets are going to allow us to, uh, multiply the number of offenders we touch with solid, uh, evidence-based programming and—other activities that will help with the rehabilitative process.

You know, it's also—it serves as a telephone, so the—the offenders will all have greater access to telephone where they connect—can connect with mentors and family members more often than they are now. And they will also be able to, uh, purchase some—some leisure time things, some—some movies and games and music and, you know, those are all important. Where the offenders can occupy their time instead of, uh, doing things that—that are not good, that, uh, often result in—in rule violations or not-good things happening across the prison system.

So, I think these tablets, it's going to be a long process. We've got 55 prisons to, uh, complete the installation, but once it's in, I—I think this is going to be a significant enhancement to safety, uh, for our staff and offenders, to the rehabilitative process. These are—these are a very secure technology application. The offenders don't have direct access to the internet, and there are a number of firewall security protocols that are in place, so those that are listening, you know, will not have to worry about breaches or inappropriate conduct on—on the, uh, internet on the part of our offenders. But I think this is really going to be a—be a good thing for our system moving forward. We've done a lot of homework and benchmarked with other systems from across—across the

country that have seen tremendous return on the investment, and we're looking forward to the same here in North Carolina.

**Julia:** That's very interesting. Uh, I was curious how—how the tablet's going to be controlled. You said they're not going to have internet access, but how are we gonna ensure that they are using those programs, that they only have access for programs that will be beneficial?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, we—we control the entire content and curriculum, so anything that goes on the tablets is something that is screened and approved by us. The vendor that we've selected has a very strong record—reputation of security regarding the, uh, the use. They've got a very comprehensive program and—and workforce that is really dedicated to making sure that the tablets are not misused in any way. If there is a hint of misuse, we are immediately notified and can take action to—to stop whatever's going on.

**Julia:** Well, Commissioner, those programs sound very promising as well as ambitious. Do you have any other items that you'd like to tell us about that may be game changers, you know, for our prisons in the next several years?

**Commr. Ishee:** A couple other elements that—that are *really* going to be big for us is the strategic plan requires the, uh, pursuit of accreditation through the American Correctional Association, and our plan is to have a fully accredited prison system within the next seven years or less. You know, ACA accreditation is really the gold standard in the prison business. And probably the other thing that—that I think that I hold great hope for is we are going to, uh, we are in the process of selecting and hiring a—an administrator for the North Carolina Prisons Innovation Institute. And I think this is going to be something that is really going to be special for us moving forward. We borrowed the idea and benchmarked with our, uh, a model that—that is part of many of our universities across the country, but it's all about, uh, keeping us on the front end and what are—what are best practices that we can research and apply here to North Carolina.

Uh, they're going to serve as a incubator for initiatives, and you know, one of the things in—in prisons that sometimes it's hard to resist is, “Hey, I think we should do this,” and that turns into “Yeah, that's a good idea. Let's do it.” And I think if we're going to be the best we can be, we've always got to be strategic, so we're going to use this as an incubator to—to flush out is this in our best interest. The institute is also going to be a quality assurance arm for us, uh, for, again, everything we do, and have a number of key performance indicators that they will monitor to make sure that we are holding ourself to the standards of excellence that—that we all expect and what the state of, uh, North Carolina deserves. You know, we're also going to use this to launch a Back to Basics Initiative throughout our prison system where, again, the concept of our—our line staff know what's best, we are going to tap into their knowledge and expertise and use them to help, um, fix problems if they arise and to—to help us move forward with good ideas.

**Kirsten:** Sounds like there's a lot going on behind the scenes for the North Carolina prison system. Um, is there anything else that we've missed or anything else that you'd like to share with our listeners on the Safety Scoop?

**Commr. Ishee:** Well, I just I think in—in wrapping up, I've now been in corrections for 31 years, and I've had the opportunity to work in many jurisdictions across our country during my career. Now, I have—have visited each one of our prisons, uh, so I've been out and been able to interact with our staff and, you know, just based on—on my experiences in and outside of North Carolina, we've got some of the best of the best here, and, uh, we've got bright young talent. We've got experienced talent. We've got incredibly committed, hard-working professionals. Uh, we've—we've got a team that is—is muscling through this pandemic and—and continuing to lead and continuing to respond to emergency despite, uh, risks to their personal health, and you know, I—I often say it, but we've got a large contingent of—of heroes working in our prison system during this pandemic. And I—I could not be more hopeful about our future. We've got a workforce that is engaged and, I think, committed to our plan, and I really, I can never thank them enough, uh, for the service that they're providing to the citizens of North Carolina and I just, I really am hopeful about our—our future and just want to just pass on that last thank you, uh, to our team for—for everything they do to, uh, make North Carolina a—a—a safer state and have safer communities as a result of their work.

## **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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