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The state's prison system halted employee discipline, citing coronavirus, but changed course a day later

The move drew blowback from several in the criminal justice community, including Suffolk DA Rachael Rollins

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 18, 2020, 7:11 p.m.



As of Tuesday, the Massachusetts Department of Correction said it had not received any reports of coronavirus infection inside state prison facilities, where roughly 8,800 people are incarcerated. JESSEY DEARING FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A top deputy at the Massachusetts Department of Correction issued an agency-wide directive on Tuesday that halted all employee discipline and lifted the suspensions of prison guards and other workers because of the coronavirus outbreak.

But a day later, amid growing public backlash, Correction Department Commissioner Carol Mici rescinded the eyebrow-raising order in her own memo. Mici said the earlier directive was unauthorized, distributed without her knowledge, and that the prison system's disciplinary procedure should remain unchanged.

Mici also suspended deputy commissioner Michael G. Grant for his actions, according to a person briefed on the matter but not authorized to discuss it publicly.

The state Department of Correction has come under scrutiny recently, and is being [sued](#) over allegations that correction officers used excessive force earlier this year on inmates at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center, the state's sole maximum security prison. The officers' actions were allegedly reprisal for an earlier attack by inmates that [left several guards injured](#).

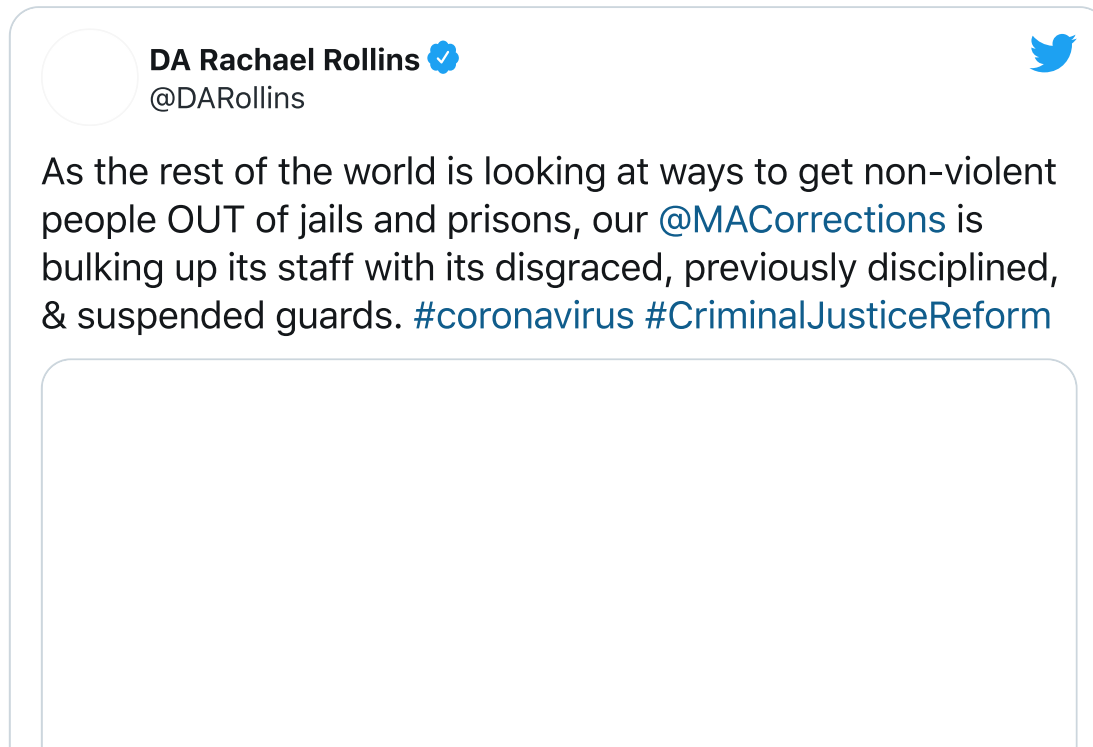
The memo halting employee discipline drew immediate backlash from leaders in the criminal justice community, including Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins, who called it "an invitation to harm, punish and violate prisoners."

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“As the rest of the world is looking at ways to get non-violent people OUT of jails and prisons, our [Department of Correction] is bulking up its staff with its disgraced, previously disciplined, & suspended guards,” Rollins tweeted Wednesday.





She tweeted at some lawmakers asking them “to highlight this hypocrisy.”

The memo, dated Tuesday, appeared Wednesday on the website of the Massachusetts Correction Officers Federated Union, which represents about 4,000 prison workers. It [no longer appeared](#) on the site late Wednesday afternoon.

The directive, authored by Grant and addressed to Correction Department’s “executive leadership team,” said: “Effective immediately there will be a moratorium on all staff discipline until further notice. This will include all hearings and appeals at the central office and local level.

“There will also be a moratorium on any staff serving suspensions,” the memo added. “Any situations that are of an egregious nature and require immediate action will be handled on a case by case basis.”

The memo said the move was made “due to the recent COVID-19 crisis” but provided no other details. It’s unclear how many staffers were currently serving suspensions, or whether it pertained to any prison guards involved in the January incidents at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center.

In a Wednesday afternoon press conference, Governor Charlie Baker seemed to be unaware of the directive when a reporter asked him about it.

“On that one in particular, I’ll have to get back to you,” he said. “I can tell you that the DOC has been taking a lot of guidance from the folks at [the Department of] Public Health with respect to almost all of their policies and procedures around managing inmates and managing their facilities.”

Mici issued her memo a few hours later. Correction Department spokesman Jason Dobson shared the document Wednesday evening, but declined to comment further. Reached by telephone, Grant hung up on a reporter.

A spokesman for Baker’s Executive Office of Public Safety and Security said Wednesday that no other agencies under its purview had issued similar directives.

Officials at the Massachusetts Correction Officers Federated Union did not respond to requests for comment.

The memo Grant wrote had also drawn criticism Wednesday from the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts.

“We are deeply concerned that the Department of Correction is limiting scrutiny of its own staff amid ongoing allegations of abuse and brutality by corrections officers at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center,” executive director Carol Rose said in a released statement. “If the Department of Correction believes that people should face

milder discipline due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it should start with the people in its custody, in addition to its staff."

Correctional facilities are dangerous breeding grounds for viruses, public health experts say. Prison and jail systems across the country have [announced several measures](#) to stop the potential spread of COVID-19.

Massachusetts officials recently suspended visits to inmates by family and friends, though attorneys are still allowed to see inmates. The department also said it has provided inmates with educational materials on the transmission of infectious diseases, encouraging frequent hand-washing, and providing inmates health care as needed.

Prisoner legal advocates have [called for](#) more transparency about prison health and safety precautions, and encouraged a reduction of the population through the [early release](#) of some inmates.

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Vernal Coleman of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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