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NEWS / HILLSBOROUGH

Hillsborough sheriff releases 164 county jail inmates to reduce coronavirus risk

The inmates are pre-trial detainees accused of low-level, non-violent crimes, Sheriff Chad Chronister said.



Hillsborough Sheriff Chad Chronister announces Thursday that he has ordered the release of inmates to reduce the county jail population amid the coronavirus pandemic. With Chronister is Hillsborough Chief Judge Ronald Ficarrota, who signed an order allowing the release. [Spectrum Bay News 9]

By **Tony Marrero**

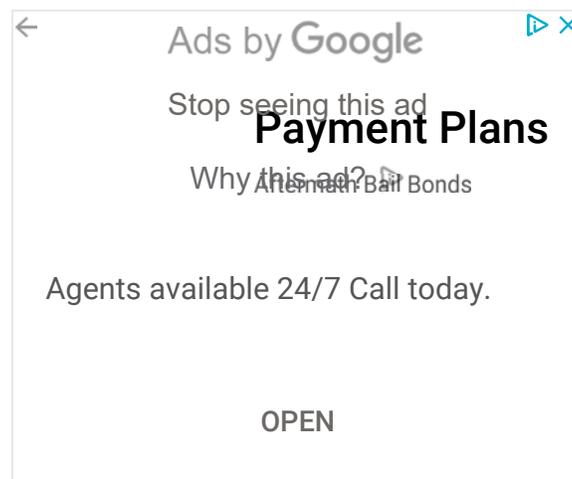
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TAMPA — A 34-year-old hotel housekeeper charged with cocaine possession. A 19-year-old student facing burglary and petty theft charges. An unemployed man with no home address picked up on a trespassing offense.



These are a few of the 164 inmates Hillsborough Sheriff Chad Chronister released from the county jail this week to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus in close quarters.

All the inmates released are accused of low-level, non-violent crimes and are waiting for their cases to be resolved. The goal is to shrink the chance that

other inmates, detention deputies, jail staff and their families are exposed to the virus, Chronister said in a news conference Thursday at the Orient Road jail.

“The federal, state and local governments are enlisting everyone’s help in mitigating the risk of exposure to the coronavirus,” Chronister said. “We are asking citizens to do their part, and at the Sheriff’s Office we must do our part, too, which is why I’m taking this step.”

There are no confirmed cases of the virus among the roughly 2,700 inmates housed at the county’s two jails, on Falkenburg and Orient roads, Chronister said. The jails aren’t facing an overcrowding problem.

But public health officials warn against crowds and close contact and advise practicing social isolation. Civil-rights groups have urged jails to take immediate action to shrink jail populations to reduce the risk of outbreaks. Chief among their suggestions is the release of inmates who have been arrested but not sentenced.

Sheriffs across the country and in Florida have taken similar action to whittle inmate populations. The Lake County Sheriff’s Office this week released 44 nonviolent, misdemeanor offenders and directed them to show up at their next court appearance, according to local media reports.

On Thursday, civil rights groups called on Pinellas Sheriff Bob Gualtieri to take similar measures in response to a *Tampa Bay Times* story about crowding in his jail.

The Pinellas jail population has ballooned in recent days after the Florida Department of Corrections, which runs the state prison system, stopped accepting inmate transfers from county jails. That means offenders who have been sentenced or are housed temporarily at a county jail can’t go back to the prison where they were serving their sentence.

Gualtieri said Tuesday he will consider other options before starting to release inmates. These include moving inmates to jails in counties that have more capacity.

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A joint statement from Faith in Florida, Southern Poverty Law Center and Dream Defenders urges Gualtieri to release pre-trial detainees who don't pose a public safety risk and inmates held on detainer requests from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"Jails and prisons combine the worst aspects of cruise ships, conferences, or other large public gatherings and thus breed entirely unnecessary risk for those on both sides of the jail walls," the statement said. "Under current conditions, any unwillingness or refusal to release those incarcerated is shortsighted, dangerous, and cruel."

As of Thursday morning, 161 inmates were sleeping on the floor, according to a Pinellas sheriff's spokesman. Gualtieri said in an email that daily bookings have been cut by one third. He did not comment on the statement by the activist groups.

Chronister made his announcement the morning after Hillsborough's Chief Judge Ronald Ficarrotta signed an administrative order authorizing the sheriff to release certain inmates from jail during the current state of emergency. The order covers people accused of third-degree felonies, criminal traffic offenses, misdemeanors, and county and municipal ordinance violations.

It is similar to emergency measures that have been taken in advance of approaching hurricanes.

"These defendants are the lowest public safety risk and were merely sitting in jail because they could not pay the amount to bond out," Chronister said. "These defendants will still have to answer to the charges against them. It is my hope these individuals will make the most of this opportunity to be with

their loved ones, help them prepare, comfort them and quarantine with them.”

The *Times* reviewed booking information for some of the inmates after the Sheriff’s Office provided the full list. They face charges such as burglary, criminal mischief, cocaine possession, trespassing, petty theft and driving under the influence. Several inmates were listed as “at large,” “unemployed” or both. Some were listed as “homeless.”



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If any of the released inmates commit another offense, Chronister said, “we will deal with them in the strictest manner possible.”

Meantime, the number of people being booked into the jail has dropped significantly because deputies have been directed to issue notices to appear in court for minor offenses rather than arrest people, Chronister said. Gualtieri has directed his deputies to take the same approach where possible.

Police departments in Hillsborough are taking similar measures, Chronister said.

On Wednesday, 52 people were booked into the jail, records show — about half the total of a typical day.

Times staff writer Kathryn Varn contributed to this report.

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Tampa Bay Times coronavirus coverage