# U.S. Supreme Court Denies Immunity to California Prison Officials Over San Quentin COVID-19 Outbreak



On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to grant California prison officials immunity against lawsuits stemming from their decision to transfer COVID-19-infected inmates to San Quentin State Prison in May 2020. This transfer led to a significant outbreak at the facility, resulting in the deaths of 26 inmates and Sergeant Gilbert Polanco, a guard with over 20 years of service at San Quentin.

The original transfer from the California Institution for Men in Chino—which was experiencing its own severe outbreak, with around 600 infected inmates and nine deaths—involved moving 122 inmates to San Quentin, which had no reported cases at the time. Shortly after their arrival, the virus spread rapidly, eventually infecting at least 2,100 inmates and 270 staff by early September.

The decision to transfer the inmates has been widely criticized by state lawmakers as a severe mismanagement of prison health, described as possibly the worst in California's history. The outbreak and subsequent legal challenges have spotlighted the qualified immunity defense, which protects officials from lawsuits unless they clearly violated established rights.

Sgt. Polanco's case is particularly noted; his family alleges that his death was a result of deliberate indifference by prison officials who failed to protect him from a preventable risk, especially given his pre-existing health conditions and duties during the pandemic which included transporting sick inmates without proper protective gear. The U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals supported this stance, allowing the lawsuits to proceed, indicating prison officials failed to shield him from harm.

With the Supreme Court’s rejection of the qualified immunity claim for these officials, the lawsuits against the involved prison authorities are poised to progress, questioning their handling of COVID-19 protections and inmate safety during the early months of the pandemic.