

March 13, 2020

Re: COVID-19 and the Travis County Jail

Dear Sheriff Hernandez:

As you know, jails are uniquely vulnerable to the spread of disease, and normal precautions regarding social distancing and sanitation are impossible for many people within the Travis County Jail. In order to prevent, limit, and manage a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in our jail, we urge you to take immediate action, including at least the following steps:

1. Minimize the number of new arrestees coming into the jail and rotating through booking: The Collin County Sheriff has urged arresting agencies to limit the number of arrests, especially for non-violent offenses. The Travis County Sheriff's Office should follow suit by communicating with Austin Police Department and other arresting agencies. Law enforcement officers should be using summons and citations whenever possible in lieu of arrest. We also urge you to reject new arrests for non-violent offenses for as long as the Disaster Declaration remains in effect.

2. Release as many people as possible through accelerated time credit calculations and other tools: We urge you to immediately begin accelerating time credit calculations, and to review all persons serving sentences to determine if there are options other than confinement, including work release and home confinement. We especially urge you to release all elderly, immunocompromised, pregnant, and otherwise medically vulnerable people. You should also coordinate with the Travis County Criminal Courts to ensure release of as many pretrial arrestees as possible, and you should call on the Travis County Commissioners Court to approve all necessary funding for monitoring and other services.

3. Have a plan to minimize risk for people still in the jail: We urge you to screen all incoming arrestees for signs of COVID-19 prior to admission to the booking area of the jail, and to reject admission of anyone who shows signs of illness. Also ensure access to hygiene supplies, and relax any rules in place that categorize hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies as contraband. Have a plan for how to house people who may have the virus, and how to prevent staff who may have the virus from infecting others. Ensure that personal who have recently traveled to affected areas not staff the jail. If in-person visitation is canceled, increase free access to phone and video calls. ensure that personal who have recently traveled to affected areas not staff the jail. Arrange for video court appearances wherever possible, and ensure that all transport vehicles are routinely cleaned and disinfected. Finally, we urge you to coordinate with Travis County Central Health to ensure prompt delivery of medical services to people who are infected.

4. Eliminate medical co-pays: Even if all reasonable precautions are taken, it is likely that there will be an outbreak of COVID-19 in the Travis County Jail. People trapped in the jail will contract the virus and many will need medical support. Because there will not be sufficient

testing to determine who has the virus, *all* medical co-pays and fees should be eliminated until the crisis is under control.

Thank you for your attention to this issue. We hope to be in contact with you as you work to limit the spread of this virus and protect our most vulnerable.

Sincerely,

Texas Fair Defense Project

Texas Appleseed

Austin Justice Coalition

Texas Advocates for Justice

Grassroots Leadership

Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

Ranjana Natarajan, Clinical Professor, University of Texas School of Law (affiliation purposes only)

Michele Deitch, Senior Lecturer, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs (affiliation purposes only)