

March 20, 2020

Sheriff Gonzalez,
County Judge Hidalgo,
Commissioners Eliis, Garcia, Raddick, Cagle,
Criminal District Court Judges,
County Courts at Law,

We are physicians serving the people of Harris County, practicing in a variety of settings, from community-based clinics to large referral hospitals. We urge the County's leaders to take swift action *today* to avert the catastrophic loss of life that would result if and when the Harris County Jail becomes a vector for COVID-19.

As the people of Harris County band together and take extraordinary measures to combat the impending wave of COVID-19 cases, we are increasingly concerned about the thousands of patients confined in close quarters in the Harris County Jail and unable to comply with Centers for Disease Control recommendations for preventing the spread of COVID-19. Correctional facilities create optimal conditions for an infectious disease outbreak, as evidenced by the mumps scare in our very own jail just this past year. Universities across the state have recognized that dorms of students living in close quarters are too dangerous during the pandemic, yet the jail remains fully-housed. Unlike university dorms, which generally house some of society's healthiest members, jails house a disproportionate number of some of the country's most vulnerable populations - individuals with chronic diseases and the elderly - who are at the highest risk for life threatening complications from the virus. People in jail who are at lower risk for severe illness are unable to adhere to the Center for Disease Control's recommendations to prevent the spread of the virus - such as social distancing, hand washing, and self-quarantining - and therefore contribute to its propagation.

The signatories of this letter believe that all Texans deserve better health and equitable health care. No person--regardless of what he or she is accused or convicted of--deserves to be placed at higher risk of a life threatening illness, especially when reasonable prevention measures are available.

The Sheriff and other elected officials are responsible for the health and safety of *everyone* in Harris County. In the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Harris County Jail is a ticking time bomb that has the potential to devastate the lives of inmates, jail personnel, and others throughout the entire Harris County community. The Sheriff, County Commissioners, and Judges must work immediately to reduce the jail population by thousands of people. Not doing so will undoubtedly lead to the spread of COVID-19 through the jail population, to all who interact with inmates (corrections officers, chaplains, attorneys, counselors, and other service providers) and beyond, increasing the morbidity and mortality of all people in Harris County.

The Sheriff, County Commissioners, and Judges should start with the following common-sense policies regarding those individuals who pose no safety risk in the community:

- Release all medically vulnerable people in the jail, including the following: patients with an advanced chronic illness, an immunodeficiency (for example, those with HIV or receiving immunosuppressant medication), as well as anyone else recommended for release by a medical professional;
- Release anyone 60 or over;
- Release a sufficient number of inmates to guarantee the jail can accommodate adequate social distancing guidelines set forth by the CDC. To do this, we recommend releasing those unable to pay bond prior to trial; and
- Anyone remaining in the jail should be given uninhibited access to free medical care, available testing, and adequate sanitation practices that comply with CDC recommendations.

While it is crucial to release those who are medically vulnerable and at risk of serious complications, officials cannot stop there. Releasing only those at risk of complications from COVID-19 will have only a minor effect on spread of the illness in the close quarters of the jail. Numbers must be reduced in a significant way so inmates can adhere to CDC recommendations. We firmly believe that these measures will protect all residents of Harris County, and allow us to do our part to flatten the curve of infection. Judge Hidalgo, Sheriff Gonzalez, and the Commissioner's court have shown encouraging signs of leadership on this issue. We hope that the larger Harris County criminal legal bureaucracy, including judges presiding over felony cases, can meet this emergency with the urgency it requires.

Time is of the essence. These important, life-saving steps must be taken immediately.

Sincerely,

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