



March 10, 2020

Dear South Carolina Sheriffs:

We are writing to urge you to immediately develop evidence-based and proactive plans for the prevention and management of COVID-19 in South Carolina jails. We stand ready and willing to arrange a phone call with you in the coming weeks to discuss effective measures to protect the health of the people in your custody and the people who work in the jails.

People in prisons and jails are highly vulnerable to outbreaks of contagious illnesses. They are housed in close quarters and are often in poor health. Without the active engagement of the jail administration, they have little ability to inform themselves about preventive measures, or to take such measures if they do manage to learn of them.

We ask that you immediately reach out to the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to develop plans to address the virus in your jail. This is an urgent matter. Having an appropriate, evidence-based plan in place can help prevent an outbreak and minimize its impact if one does occur. Not having one may cost lives.

While the plan should be developed collaboratively by your department and DHEC together, some of the critical issues that must be addressed are:

\* **Education of the people in your custody:** People housed in jails need to be informed about the virus and the measures they can take to minimize their risk of contracting or spreading the virus. They must be educated on the importance of proper hand washing, coughing into their elbows, and social distancing to the extent they can. Information about the spread of the virus, the risks associated with it, and prevention and treatment measures must be based on the best available science.

\* **Education of the staff:** Correctional, administrative, and medical staff all must be educated about the virus to protect themselves and their families, as well as the people in their custody.

\* **Staffing plans:** Regardless of how many staff members stay home because they are sick, the jails will have to continue functioning. There must be a plan for how necessary functions and services will continue if large numbers of staff are out with the virus.

\* **Staffing plans for services provided by detainees:** Many tasks in jails, such as food preparation and basic sanitation, are performed by detainees. The plans for an outbreak must

also address how necessary tasks performed by detainees will continue if large numbers of detainees are ill.

\* **Provision of hygiene supplies:** The most basic aspect of infection control is hygiene. There must be ready access to warm water and adequate hygiene supplies, both for hand washing and for cleaning.

\* **Screening and testing of the people in your custody:** The plan must include guidance, based on the best science available, on how and when to screen and test people in your facilities for the virus.

\* **Housing of persons exposed to the virus:** The plan must describe how and where people in the jail system will be housed if they are exposed to the virus, are at high risk of serious illness if they become infected or become sick with it. *This should not result in prolonged, widespread lockdowns. Any lockdowns or interruptions in regular activities, such as exercise or visits and phone calls with families or attorneys, should be based solely on the best science available and should be as limited as possible in scope and duration.*

\* **Treatment:** Courses of treatment must be evidence-based, available immediately, and in compliance with scientifically based public health protocols.

\* **Vulnerable Populations:** The plan must provide for additional precautions for those who are at high risk of serious illness if they are infected, such as pregnant women and people with chronic illnesses, compromised immune systems, or disabilities, and people whose housing placements restrict their access to medical care and limit the staff's ability to observe them.

\* **Data collection:** The collection of data regarding COVID-19 will be part of the public health response. As with any contagious disease, data collection is critical to understanding and fighting the virus. Jails must be part of this process. The same information that is tracked in the community must be tracked in jails.

Please let us know if you are interested in scheduling a phone conversation to discuss these topics in further depth.

Sincerely,  
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