

March 16, 2020

To: District Attorney Margaret Moore and County Attorney David Escamilla

Re: COVID-19 and the Travis County Jail

Dear District Attorney Moore and County Attorney Escamilla:

We recognize that the threat of COVID-19 is unprecedented and appreciate that you are working hard to address this threat. As you know, jails are uniquely vulnerable to the spread of disease, and normal precautions regarding social distancing and sanitation are impossible to abide by for many people confined within the Travis County Jail. We share your goal of preventing, limiting, and managing a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in our jail, and to that end, we urge you to take the following steps:

1. Recall all non-priority warrants and reject new warrants for non-violent offenses: Travis County needs to do everything possible to minimize the number of new arrestees coming into the jail and rotating through booking for “walk-throughs.” Many jurisdictions have been taking proactive steps to limit the number of new arrests. Your offices should immediately recall non-priority warrants, including but not limited to all warrants for non-violent offenses, drug offenses, DWLI, and Class C misdemeanors. Similarly, your offices should reject new warrants and cases for non-violent offenses.

2. Take steps to release as many people from the Travis County Jail as possible:

- Issue a statement supporting the immediate release on personal bond of all people being held pretrial for non-violent offenses, including non-violent felony drug offenses;
- Work with the Travis County Sheriff, the Travis County criminal courts, and Pretrial Services to identify and release all persons who would not pose an immediate threat to public safety if released, either with or without monitoring conditions;
- Minimize custodial sentences to the greatest extent possible, and minimize monitoring conditions that require in-person check-ins; and
- Call on the Travis County Commissioners Court to approve all necessary funding for monitoring and other services.

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,

Emily Gerrick, Managing Attorney, Texas Fair Defense Project

Sarah Labowitz, Policy Director, ACLU of Texas

Chas Moore, Executive Director, Austin Justice Coalition

Kathy Mitchell, Policy Coordinator, Just Liberty

Meme Styles, President and Founder, MEASURE Austin

Brennan Griffin, Deputy Director, Texas Appleseed

Douglas Smith, Senior Policy Analyst, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

Annette Price, Interim Executive Co-Director, Grassroots Leadership and Texas Advocates for Justice

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