March 25, 2020

Hon. Larry Hogan
Governor of Maryland
Annapolis, MD

Dear Governor Hogan:

We are writing as faculty members of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, School of Nursing and School of Medicine to express our urgent concern about the spread of COVID-19 in Maryland's prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers. As you know, COVID-19 is highly contagious, difficult to prevent except through social distancing, and especially dangerous to individuals over age 60 or with a chronic disease. Moreover, recent data suggest that the virus can remain on surfaces for up to 72 hours, thus rendering social distancing less effective in circumstances where the virus is present.

Jails, prisons, detention facilities and other closed settings have long been known to be associated with high transmission probabilities for infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, multi-drug resistant tuberculosis, influenza, MRSA (methicillin resistant staph aureus), and viral hepatitis. Several deaths were reported in the US in immigration detention facilities associated with ARDS (acute respiratory distress syndrome) following influenza A, including a 16 year old immigrant child who died of untreated ARDS in custody in May 2019. ARDS is the life-threatening complication of COVID-19 disease and has a 30% mortality given ideal care. A correctional officer in New York has also died of the disease.

The close quarters of jails and prisons, the inability to employ effective social distancing measures, and the many high-contact surfaces within facilities, make transmission of COVID-19 more likely. Soap and hand sanitizers are not freely available in some facilities. Hand sanitizers like Purell, are banned in many facilities, because they contain alcohol. Further, for incarcerated individuals who are infected or very sick, the ability properly to treat them and save their lives is very limited. Testing kits are in short supply, and prisons and jails have limited options for proper respiratory isolation.

A number of features of these facilities can heighten risks for exposure, acquisition, transmission, and clinical complications of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. These include physical/mechanical risks such as overcrowding, population density in close confinement, insufficient ventilation, shared toilets, showers, and eating environments and limited availability of hygiene and personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves in some facilities. The high rate of turnover and population mixing of staff and detainees also increases likelihoods of exposure. This has led to prison outbreaks of COVID-19 in multiple detention facilities in China, associated with introduction into facilities by staff.

These populations are also at additional risk, due to high rates of chronic health conditions; substance use; mental health issues; and, particularly in prisons, aging and chronically ill populations who may be vulnerable to more severe illnesses after COVID-19 infection, and to death. Given that Maryland prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers incarcerate high

numbers of marginalized populations and African Americans will be disproportionately affected by these risks.

Prison, jail, and detention center staff may bring the virus into the facility and are also at risk of acquisition from infected incarcerated individuals. Once infected, staff may also transmit the virus back into the communities and to their families. As jail, prison, and detention center health care staff themselves get sick with COVID-19, workforce shortages will make it even more difficult to adequately address all the health care needs in facilities.

Every effort should be made to reduce exposure in jails and other detention facilities, and we appreciate the efforts thus far of administrators toward this goal. To ensure that there are no impediments for inmates to come forward when sick, health care must be available to inmates without co-pays. But there should also be efforts to reduce the state prison population as well. It may be extremely difficult, however, to achieve and sustain prevention of transmission in these closed settings and given the design feature of the facilities. Moreover, lockdowns and use of solitary confinement should not be used as a public health measure, both because they have limited effectiveness and because they are a severe infringement of the rights of incarcerated people. It is therefore an urgent priority in this time of national public health emergency to reduce the number of persons in detention as quickly as possible.

Treatment needs of infected incarcerated individuals also need to be met, including expanded arrangements with local hospitals. It is essential that these facilities, which are public institutions, be transparent about their plans for addressing COVID-19. Such transparency will help public health officials and families of incarcerated people know what facilities are doing, and it also can help jurisdictions across the state share information and best practices. Other counties across the country have shared their action plans with the public and Maryland should follow these examples.

We therefore urge you to take the following steps:

1. Require correctional facility administrators to make their plans for prevention and management of COVID-19 in their institutions publicly available, as the San Francisco Sheriff's Department has done. Protocols should be in line with national CDC guidance. Frequently updated recommendations and model protocols are available from the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (https://www.ncchc.org/blog/covid-19-coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know-in-corrections)
2. Ensure that intake screening protocols are updated to include COVID-specific questions.
3. Ensure the availability of sufficient soap and hand sanitizer for incarcerated individuals without charge; restrictions on alcohol (in hand sanitizers) should be suspended.
4. Implement other precautions to limit transmission within prisons and jails without relying on widespread use of lockdowns and solitary confinement. Additional precautions jointly issued by the Vera Institute of Justice and Community Oriented

Correctional Health Services are available at https://cochs.org/files/covid-19/covid-19-jails-prison-immigration.pdf

5. Consider pre-trial detention only in genuine cases of security concerns. Persons held for non-payment of fees and fines, or because of insufficient funds to pay bail, or parole or probation violations, should be prioritized for release. No one in these categories should be sent to jail
6. Expedite consideration of all older incarcerated individuals and those with chronic conditions predisposing to severe COVID-19 disease (heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, immune-compromise) for parole or other form of release from prison, with alternative forms of supervision and with supports in the community once released. Clemency power and expanded authority in Maryland law for administrative parole should be employed.
7. Invest in increased resources for discharge planning and re-entry transitions to facilitate prison release of people under these revised policies.
8. Arrange for COVID-19 testing of incarcerated individuals and correctional facility workers who become ill.
9. Cease any collection of fees or co-pays or medical care.
10. Seek a Medicaid 1135 waiver to enable hospitals to provide an appropriate level of care to incarcerated individuals who are sick. See https://cochs.org/files/medicaid/COVID-19-Justicie-Involved-1135-Waiver.pdf

This pandemic is shedding a bright light on the extent of the connection between all members of society: jails, prisons and other detention facilities are not separate, but are fully integrated with our community. As public health experts, we believe these steps are essential to support the health of incarcerated individuals, who are some of the most vulnerable people in our society; the vital personnel who work in prisons and jail; and all people in the state of Maryland. Our compassion for and treatment of these populations impact us all.

Thank you very much.

This letter represents the views of the following signatories, and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University

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