



March 17, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL

March 16, 2020

Sheriff Terry Rowan, President
Sheriff Jason Myers (Ret.), Executive Director
Oregon State Sheriffs Association
330 Hood Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Preparation and Precautions for COVID-19 in Jail Detention Settings

Dear Sheriff Rowan and Sheriff Myers:

As you know, the current outbreak of a novel strain of the coronavirus, COVID-19, has caused widespread concern. Its effects can be fatal, especially among older people, people with respiratory illness, people who are immunocompromised, and people who have diabetes. It spreads easily among people in close contact and from contact with contaminated surfaces. Local jails are a potential hotbed for communication of this illness. In China, coronavirus spread rapidly throughout multiple jails earlier this year.

The undersigned represent a coalition of community organizations interested in the operation of the criminal justice system. We ask you to encourage your member organizations, the sheriffs of Oregon who administer county jails, to adopt the following protective steps:

- 1) **Reduce jail population.** Just as people outside jails are being encouraged to remain home, reducing the overall number of people in a small enclosed jail should be a major goal. Coordinate with the local district attorney, the local court, and other agencies to reduce intake of new detainees and to encourage release of any inmates that can be properly released, especially those who are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus.

This includes individuals being held for an aid and assist evaluation or transfer to the state hospital for restoration services.

- 2) **Adequate cell and personal hygiene for inmates and staff.** Please ensure that both inmates and staff have adequate soap and running water to wash their hands routinely. Inmates also need regular access to supplies for cleaning their cells or common areas.
- 3) **Consider reserving a quarantine unit for vulnerable inmates.** Inmates who meet the criteria for high vulnerability to coronavirus may need to be separated from the general population, with a dedicated on-duty staff without floaters.
- 4) **Conduct routine screening of staff before and after each shift begins.** Staff and any outside contractors should have their temperatures taken at the beginning and end of each shift and otherwise have their health assessed to ensure that no one carrying the coronavirus begins work.
- 5) **Engage in planning with your local hospital.** Jails in Oregon are not well-equipped to address active coronavirus infections. Please identify the local community hospital that would receive any inmates with suspected symptoms and determine the process for ensuring that inmates who become infected can obtain appropriate and rapid screening, testing, and care.
- 6) **Expand routine medical intake to evaluate new detainees for possible coronavirus.** Brief screening questions about travel, illness in the family, and any current symptoms, as well as checking detainee temperatures, might help identify at-risk detainees.
- 7) **Avoid using large, communal detention cells, overfull cells, and dormitories.** Some facilities make use of a large, communal intake or holding cell. To the extent possible, facilities should avoid pooling large numbers of detainees in a single holding cell. Ongoing overfilling of cells, like triple-celling/triple-bunking in double-cells should halt until this pandemic is under control.
- 8) **Minimize transportation to court.** Communicate with your local court to reduce the need to transport large numbers of detainees together for court appearances. Consider video or telephonic appearances for non-substantive proceedings.
- 9) **Educate staff and inmates about the importance of good hygiene.** The outbreak of the virus has been accompanied by an outbreak of myths and false reporting about the virus. Remind staff and inmates why hygiene is important, what degree of separation is important, and how best to prevent the spread of the virus.
- 10) **Ensure routine assessment of inmate condition.** Inmates who are developing fevers and feeling badly may not be able to report changes in their conditions, either because of physical weakness or changed mental state from the fever. While staff may be used to disregarding an inmate who appears to be sleeping a lot or who is not responsive, it is

especially important now to assess whether an inmate is nonresponsive as a result of an illness or for some other reason. Health care staff must be readily available to assess any concerns raised by other staff.

- 11) **Eliminate medical co-pays and fees for medical communications:** Fees and costs should not be a barrier to care. Those in custody should have clear communication about how they can access care and health information free of charge.
- 12) **Ask for and make public medical contractor plans related to COVID-19:** We understand that a number of your members may work with private contractors to provide healthcare in their facilities. These contractors must also have plans in place to respond to the needs of their staff and those in their care. Medical policies and plans should be made available to the public.
- 13) **Collect data:** 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. Oregon's jail and prison systems must be part of this process. The same information that is tracked in the community must be tracked in the jails.
- 14) **Cultural Specificity:** Jails house many people whose first language is not English. Especially during a time of crisis, it's imperative that all information is provided in a person's first language and that there are Q&A sessions in that language to ensure comprehension and mitigate misunderstanding and panic.

Consistent with the above recommendations, we have attached a letter from the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs that provides further guidance. The author of that letter, Dr. Marc Stern, is a professor at the University of Washington, School of Public Health and a corrections healthcare expert.

We hope that your members will consider these recommendations in their role of keeping inmates and staff safe. Please let us know if you have any difficulty accessing testing or related services from your local hospital or public health officials. We understand that you have a unique challenge to combating this virus, and we want to be a partner if we can.

Sincerely,

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