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Margaret Egan
Executive Director

January 29, 2021

Dear Chair Jones Austin and Vice Chair Richards, First Deputy Mayor Fuleihan Senior Vice President Yang and Commissioner Brann;

I know that we share a deep concern about the rapid increase in cases of COVID-19 in our jails. Over the past month we have seen rapid growth of COVID in the jails that includes and impacts incarcerated persons, Health Care workers, correctional officers, and civilian staff. It also certainly includes others, in the community, who have come in contact with any of the above. The City's previous success at lowering the infections among people in custody has reversed and many of these others are not on the radar screen so we can't reach out to them and or understand how the increase we are seeing in the jails relates to the increases we have been seeing across the city.

The data we have from the jails is of great concern to all of us. Most likely others have been infected outside the jails, but we do not have these numbers. This is a critical moment in the war against the virus. There is a new and promising team in Washington committed to addressing the pandemic. We too, responsible for the City's Jails, should take a fresh look at our approach. At the very least we must act differently to respond to what we are seeing: people in custody and corrections officers positively rates have gone up rapidly over the past month – an increase of 136% among people in custody, nearly 8% among DOC staff and 12% among CHS staff.

Vaccination is the clearest path to mitigating the spread of the virus in the community and the jails. Vaccination has been limited to only 500 inmates and there is no clear target for officers. We should logically treat the jails the same way we are approaching Nursing Homes and vaccinate all the people working there and all people in custody. They share the same from point of view of ending the hot spots. Together we can implore the state to expand the vaccination criteria.

In the meantime, we need to continue to focus on the measures we can take immediately – testing, mask use, and social distancing. Our testing has been focused on PCR which is highly reliable for accurate positives but, has a well-known 5-7 day period of false negatives when first infected. Therefore, we should be using antigen testing to focus on early side so that we don't miss individuals who should have been quarantined as we waited for an accurate PCR. We should also develop a sampling strategy using antigen and PCR tests beyond new admissions to detect in jail transmission before it becomes widespread. Using both would help us not miss anyone who is potentially active.

We are witnessing rapid growth in the jail population, now over 5,200, at a time when we should be keeping anyone out who can meet known criteria. We must decarcerate as much as possible and cease crowding in dormitory settings to assure at least 6 feet of distancing.

We must require masks for all who live and work in the jails and clearly and directly communicate to all the importance of wearing masks. People need to regularly hear of the importance of masks from health professionals.

We are all concerned about the numbers we are seeing. We must come together to reevaluate our approach and I am committed to working with all of you to reverse the current trend. Keeping people in the jails and the community safe and healthy should be our highest priority. To that end we must:

- Vaccinate all staff and people in custody
- Increase testing to quickly detect and address in jail transmission
- Immediately decarcerate to allow for social distancing
- Require masks for staff and people in custody at all times

Sincerely,

Steven M. Safyer, M.D.
Board Member