



February 16, 2021

The Honorable Judge J. Brian Johnson
President Judge
Lehigh County Court of Common Pleas
455 Hamilton St.
Allentown, PA 18101

Dear Judge Johnson:

We, Community Bike Works' Racial Equity Committee, are writing to express our deep concern regarding the COVID-19 pandemic at the Lehigh County Jail. Community Bike Works teaches life lessons through bicycles to the young people of Allentown and the Lehigh Valley who could benefit most, including several students who have family members that are currently incarcerated at the jail.

At Community Bike Works, we strive to be an organization of racial and economic justice and equality. We are advocates for criminal justice reform because of the inequitable practices that disproportionately impact, convict, and incarcerate people of color. We also strongly oppose the cash bail system that criminalizes poverty while allowing those with access to wealth to return home to their loved ones. Because of these values, we are particularly distressed by COVID-19 in the congregate setting of the jail.

Many people are sitting in jail simply because they cannot afford their bail, or because their court date has been pushed back due to the pandemic. Without strong advocates in the criminal justice system, these people are left to wait in appalling conditions and to fend for themselves through the greatest public health crisis in a century. The County is putting hundreds of lives – mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters - at risk with these inequitable policies and practices.

We were dismayed to hear that the Director of Corrections stated the jail was doing everything they could to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 because we know that is far from the truth. Personal connections to people currently and formerly incarcerated at the County Jail have given us insight into the day-to-day workings of the jail, and we are deeply concerned. At a recent Lehigh County Commissioners meeting, other members of the public stated that there were inadequate masks available for prisoners, and that people who were sick with COVID-19 shared cells with those who were well. In addition to the risk of COVID-19, we know that conditions at the prison are inhumane. At this meeting, a formerly incarcerated person shared that all prisoners are in their cells for 23 hours a day with barely enough time to shower or contact family.

A Pennsylvania Supreme Court order from April 2020 requires the President Judge to take action to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We are writing to demand action now before more people die. We also ask for more transparency about the jail, as well as the number of inmates who contracted

COVID-19. In the time of an unprecedented public health crisis, it is paramount to public safety that everything is done in your power to reduce the number of people in the congregate setting of jail to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

This can be done by releasing non-violent offenders, including non-violent probation violations, as well as detainees who cannot afford cash bail. Two people have already died; continuing to detain people in this way will inadvertently sentence more people to death.

Thank you for reading about our concerns and support for solutions. We hope that you will take time to reflect on our words and the young people of our community who will be impacted by the decisions you continue to make.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kim Schaffer". The ink is black and the signature is fluid and connected.

Kim Schaffer, Executive Director
Community Bike Works' Racial Equity Committee