



Memphis | Midsouth

Democratic Socialists of America

March 19, 2020

Covid-19 Statement of Demands to the Memphis and Shelby County governments

We are in a time of swift transitions. We've gone from relative certainty to uncertainty; from the appearance of surplus, to the reality of scarcity. From a world before the Covid-19 pandemic to the world after it.

There is no normal to go back to.

The financial toll the pandemic will take on our neighbors across all sectors of the economy will be deep and long-lasting. It will leave scars.

How we weather this storm depends on the competency and compassion of our elected leaders. It will depend on their priorities and the value they place on our lives, health and security.

Our neighbors will be laid off from their jobs, with rent and car payments and utility bills due, childcare to manage, student loans and healthcare bills pending. Without a remedy for the massive slowdown in economic activity, they will face hardships that will strain our community and cause civil society to buckle.

We are facing the prospect that homelessness will increase and more people experiencing homelessness will die.

In Memphis—a city where tourism, warehouse jobs and distribution are major pillars of the economy—we are extremely vulnerable to the economic calamity confronting us.

For these reasons, the Memphis-Midsouth chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America is demanding the governments of Memphis and Shelby County do the following:

1. Freeze rent and place a moratorium on all evictions from residential rental properties, suspend the sale of tax-foreclosed properties, and place a moratorium on mortgage payments and foreclosures. As long as COVID-19 remains a serious threat, it is not only dangerous but inhumane to force people from their homes. Eviction places them at greater risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Tax-foreclosed properties can be used by the city and county as emergency or temporary housing and shelter for those experiencing homelessness during this crisis.

2. Open emergency shelters for people and families experiencing homelessness and open vacant or underused properties to house individuals experiencing homelessness when shelters and temporary homes reach capacity.

Those without the ability to quarantine or shelter in place are at increased risk of becoming infected and infecting others, needlessly increasing the strain on our healthcare system and risking the safety of our healthcare workers.

3. Suspend low-level and nonviolent arrests in order to reduce the spread of the virus within the jail system and to city and county workers.

4. Release pretrial detainees who are being detained solely because they cannot afford bond.

5. Dispatch healthcare workers throughout the county jail system to treat and monitor infected individuals and prevent an outbreak that would endanger the lives of those jailed as well as workers at those facilities.

6. Place a moratorium on the county and municipal governments cooperating with ICE to ensure that undocumented people are not discouraged from seeking treatment or testing.

To unnecessarily expose individuals to the virus in crowded jails because of petty offenses, or because they are too poor to afford to be free, is inhumane and dangerous. To be blind to the health and humanity of those incarcerated displays a lack of moral character and leadership.

7. Waive all public transit fares so that those who lack transportation are not financially hindered from seeking treatment.

8. Implement free testing at all Shelby County health department locations.

In a moral society, income is not a barrier to health. During a pandemic, withholding treatment from those who cannot pay poses a danger to the health of our community.

9. Place a moratorium on the collection and accrual of interest on all fines and fees from the Shelby County General Sessions Court Clerk, Memphis City Clerk, Shelby County Clerk, Memphis City Treasurer, and Shelby County Trustee's offices for the duration of this crisis.

10. Grant all city and county workers—no matter their status—a bank of 14 days' paid sick leave specifically for this outbreak to ensure that no one is penalized for being infected or taking care of loved ones during a pandemic.

While it is encouraging that the Strickland administration has declared a State of Emergency, such declarations are meaningful only if they are met with action. Any action that ignores the suffering of workers and their families, justice-involved individuals, those experiencing homelessness, and other vulnerable populations in our community demonstrates a failure of leadership and a disregard for the people elected officials have taken an oath to serve.

We hope that the Harris administration will rise to the challenge and meet the needs of the people of Shelby County.

To our neighbors: If you believe a crisis like this should not threaten the wellbeing of your family and community, please join us in pushing our local governments to meet these demands. We are stronger together.