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Coronavirus, Cook County Jail, and the need to reduce the inmate population . . . fast

A hundred new detainees arrive daily, any one of whom could carry in the virus. And the social distancing necessary to protect against it is impossible in a jail.

By CST Editorial Board | Mar 19, 2020, 5:44pm CDT



There are no known cases of coronavirus at the jail so far, but the risk is high. | Santiago Covarrubias/Sun-Times file photo

If we've learned anything about COVID-19 in recent weeks, it's that the virus can flourish in close settings with many people. That means nursing homes, schools and hospitals — and Cook County Jail, the largest single-site jail in the United States.

The good news is there are no known coronavirus cases at the jail so far, and judges, prosecutors and public defenders are working together to release non-violent offenders who would be at particularly high risk if the virus were to surface there. This would include older men and women and those with existing health issues, such as diabetes.

Editorials

But the method of doing so — requiring each detainee to ask a judge for release during a regularly scheduled court hearing — is a gear that grinds too slowly. Fewer than 10 incarcerated people have been released since the outbreak began.

We strongly urge county justice officials and the office of Chief Judge Timothy Evans to develop a process to more quickly release many more incarcerated people — without compromising public safety — who run a high risk of being felled by the disease. The pool of candidates for release should also include other non-violent detainees charged with low-level crimes.

The looming danger

Located at 26th Street and California Avenue, the sprawling 96-acre jail houses 5,600 detainees. There are 100 new arrivals daily, any one of whom potentially could bring the virus into the jail. And there simply isn't room enough to practice the social distancing to protect against the virus that is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. Soap and facilities for frequent hand washing also are limited.

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Members of the jail's 3,300-member correctional staff could carry the virus into the jail or — equally sobering — carry it back out into the general public.

“Our employees — out living their lives,” Dart said.

Freeing up space in the jail would make it easier to quarantine and treat detainees if and when the virus does strike — and it is hard to imagine that it won't.

The jail has taken precautions such as screening incoming detainees for flu-like symptoms and holding them for seven days of observation. Dart is limiting anyone from visiting the facility other than clergy, lawyers, essential volunteers and attorneys.

Those measures eliminate some risk, but certainly not all or enough. In Santa Clara, California, this week, a pair of jail detainees were quarantined after they were visited by a defense attorney who later tested positive for coronavirus. In New York City this week, a Rikers Island inmate was discovered to have contracted the virus, as was a correctional officer assigned to an entry gate.

“A storm is coming” if New York corrections officials don’t get better prepared, Rikers’ chief medical officer, Ross MacDonald, warned Wednesday on Twitter.

What should be done?

About 25 percent of the detainees at Cook County Jail are behind bars because they don’t have the money to make bond. In addition to turning loose high-risk, non-violent offenders charged with lesser crimes, the county should work to reduce this group of 1,500 detainees. A detainee’s exposure to the coronavirus should not be based on his financial circumstances.

Police departments across Cook County can take steps, as well, to ameliorate the problem. The Chicago Police Department this week began instructing officers to issue citations, rather than make arrests, for minor offenses such as simple battery and small retail theft, said CPD spokesman Anthony Guglielmi. The idea is to reduce the number of detainees in both the county jail and police lock-ups.

It’s a simple but effective change. The number of suspects taken to jail in Los Angeles County dropped from 300 a day to 60 after sheriff’s police last month began issuing citations for minor crimes as an alternative to arrest.

“This is a moment for Cook County officials to be creative,” said Camille Bennett, director of the Illinois ACLU’s Corrections Reform Project.

We couldn’t agree more. Lives — in and out of the jail — depend on it.

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