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The Honorable Toni Preckwinkle
President
Cook County Board of Commissioners
118 N. Clark St.
Chicago, IL 60602

The Honorable Thomas J. Dart
Sheriff of Cook County
47 W. Polk St.
Chicago, IL 60605

Dear President Preckwinkle and Sheriff Dart:

We write in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic out of grave concern for the lives and safety of the thousands of women and men working at the Cook County Jail as correctional officers, nurses, paramedics, and in other critical health care and sworn officer positions. These workers are responsible for maintaining security at the Cook County Jail and providing for the welfare of five thousand inmates in detention. They are in critical public safety and health care jobs and cannot shelter at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past 48 hours, we have heard more than a dozen first-hand accounts from employees at Cook County Jail describing conditions reflecting an unconscionable disregard for human life at the Jail amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The accounts are from employees in a variety of critical jobs: correctional officers, nurses, paramedics, and mental health professionals. The employees made these reports to us because we were appointed to represent women who work at the Jail in litigation related to sexual harassment by inmates. And while conditions related to the pandemic are unrelated to our duties as counsel in that litigation, it would violate our moral duties to stay silent about the grave crisis unfolding at the Jail.

As of yesterday, at least 134 detainees and 20 staff members have already tested positive for coronavirus. This appears to be among the highest level of infection of any correctional facility (if not *any* facility of *any* kind) in the nation. The reported figures at Cook County Jail are almost as high as the most recent figures reported for Rikers Island, even though the infection rate in the city of Chicago is exponentially lower than the rate in New York City.

The first-hand reports we have received from employees at the Jail cannot be reconciled with statements that Sheriff Dart has made to various news outlets to assuage public concern. These first-hand reports reflect that Sheriff Dart as well as Cook County Health, which is responsible for the provision of health care at the Jail,

have failed to take even basic measures to protect critical public safety and health care personnel, as well as inmates in detention. The failure to take immediate action to comply with Center for Disease Control (CDC) Guidance for detention centers will almost certainly lead to exponentially more COVID-19 infections and preventable lost lives. Given both the location of the Jail and the movement of employees and detainees in and out of the facility, it will likely serve as an incubator of illness and in some cases, death.

What follows is a summary of first-hand accounts received over the past 48 hours from officers, nurses, paramedics, and mental health professionals at the Cook County Jail. The employees work in a variety of assignments, including at the County medical facility (Cermak Health), in multiple housing divisions and the receiving and transportation units, and in medical positions that involve the provision of care throughout the facility. The reported conditions are unconscionable, reflecting a disregard for human life. While we cannot verify them, we have no reason to doubt the veracity or accuracy of these accounts. Most of the facts have been confirmed by multiple employees. The reported conditions in the Jail create a grave risk to employees and to individuals in detention.

In summary, more than dozen critical public safety and health care personnel have reported the following conditions at the Cook County Jail:

1. **Failure to Train:** Correctional personnel have not been trained on how to protect themselves from contracting or spreading COVID-19. They have not been trained on how coronavirus is transmitted or the basic handwashing and other measures that must be taken to prevent its spread. They have not been trained on how to protect themselves, their coworkers, or inmates; sanitize their work areas; oversee the disinfection of the extensive metal surfaces that inmates and employees come into contact with all day, every day; or how to don and dispose of the minimal protective equipment available. Cook County Health is the entity that should train officers—immediately.

The lack of training includes correctional officers assigned to quarantine tiers housing inmates who have tested positive for COVID-19. Unlike other corrections personnel, these officers have been provided some (albeit inadequate) personal protective equipment. However, no one has trained them on how to wear or dispose of the equipment. As a result, they routinely exit the COVID-19 quarantine units without properly disposing of their contaminated gear, cross-contaminating passageways, work areas, and other areas of the Jail.

2. **Failure to Provide Personal Protective Equipment:** The provision of personal protective equipment is grossly inadequate:
 - a. Until last week, officers in multiple housing divisions were instructed that they could not wear their own masks, because it would “upset the inmates.” Last week, officers were permitted to bring and wear their own masks, if they could obtain one. Until last Friday, officers were not provided with medical masks. We have now been informed that, as

of late last week, some but not all officers have limited access to N95 masks. Officers in housing division 11 have access to one N95 mask per shift and eye protection but no face shields, gowns, or gloves. Officers in housing division 6 can access N95 masks only if they are assigned to inmates that have tested positive for COVID-19. This past Saturday, officers assigned to the division 8 medical building were given surgical masks and instructed to store them in plastic bags and reuse the same masks each day. Officers in the intake unit have no masks at all. There appears to be no logic or organization to the distribution of masks to officers at highest risk, and there is certainly no universal provision of N95 masks to officers. In addition, the only officers who report having access to gloves, gowns, or face shields are those assigned to quarantine tiers or medical buildings.

- b. Cook County Health employees who travel all over the facility to carry out their job duties and routinely work in close contact with inmates (for example, medical personnel who distribute medication and assess inmates with fevers) have not had access to N95 masks.
 - c. Officers and medical personnel assigned to the COVID-19 quarantine units have been instructed to return single-use gowns, which supervisors state will be “sanitized” for reuse. However, personnel suspect that those gowns cannot be properly sanitized or safely reused.
 - d. Cook County Health supervisors have been observed hoarding N95 masks that medical personnel need right now.
3. **Failure to Provide Basic Hygiene:** Although Sheriff Dart has stated publicly, including in this morning’s Chicago Tribune report, that hand sanitizer is widely available, that is not what officers report. Instead, officers who work all over the Jail report that no hand sanitizer has been provided to staff. These officers cannot leave their posts for frequent breaks to wash their hands. They come into contact with tier doors, security office doors, and countless other metal surfaces throughout the day. They routinely pass and receive items to and from inmates. Jail officers’ inability to disinfect their hands prevents them from taking the most basic and critical measure necessary to protecting themselves and slowing the spread of coronavirus to other Jail personnel and inmates.
4. **Failure To Speak Truthfully:** Despite many reported public statements by Sheriff Dart about intensified cleaning protocols, Jail employees deny that additional protocols have been implemented, other than the provision of some cleaning supplies to inmates to clean their own facilities. Officers have not been trained on how to teach inmates to properly disinfect showers, bathrooms, common spaces in housing units that numerous inmates and employees come into contact with, or their own cells. Officers also uniformly report that the Sheriff’s Office has not provided them with additional disinfectant or other cleaning supplies to sanitize their own work spaces or other surfaces in the facility that numerous employees come into contact

with. Employees report that cleaning supplies that used to be available, including disinfectant wipes, have disappeared. In addition, multiple employees report the reuse of dirty rags without proper disinfection.

Sheriff Dart has reported to the news media that a “majority” of inmates are being housed in single cells to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Although we do not have an exact count, multiple anecdotal reports from health care staff and officers cast doubt on that representation. Officers assigned to multiple housing divisions report that inmates are still double or even quadruple bunked. In fact, Cook County Health and the Sheriff’s Office created a tier for inmates with COVID-19 in the Residential Treatment Unit. These inmates are in a dormitory-style tier that is wide open, with no cells. Inmates walk around freely all over the room. It is impossible for employees to protect themselves under those conditions. In addition, steps reported to have been taken to remove inmates from some tiers are not consistent with the practice of social isolation. For example, an employee reports that inmates were moved off a tier to reduce occupancy on that tier to one inmate per cell but that the inmates were moved to housing division 2, *which has dormitory style bunks*. That is the equivalent of taking one family member from each of 24 families in social isolation and putting them together in a single house.

Also, despite reports to press outlets and employees that contact tracing is being done, contact tracing to contain the spread of COVID-19 among Jail staff can at best be described as haphazard. Officers and health care personnel have learned of coworkers with coronavirus who work on their same shifts, use the same locker room facilities, and with whom they were in close vicinity, including at roll call meetings. None of these employees have been contacted to inform them that they have been exposed to coronavirus. And none have been instructed to self-isolate at home.

5. **Failure to Conduct Temperature Checks:** Alarming, neither the Sheriff’s Office nor Cook County Health is conducting regular temperature checks on inmates to identify inmates with symptoms of COVID-19. Last week, a nurse employed by Cook County Health reported to a tier in housing division 11, after an inmate reported feeling ill. The nurse took the inmate’s temperature, and he had a fever. In the absence of any protocol, the nurse exercised her own judgment and decided to check all inmates on the tier for fever. She identified three other inmates with fevers—*in a single housing unit*. The Sheriff’s Office and Cook County Health must immediately institute temperature checks on inmates at least daily to identify and quarantine inmates with fever, or COVID-19 will rage through the facility.

Further, contrary to public statements, memos to staff, and CDC guidance, temperature checks are not being performed for all staff daily on entry. In fact, not one Cook County Health employee or officer assigned to the medical buildings report being temperature checked. Officers in several divisions report that “checks” started late last week—*but that the thermometers being used are not for human beings*. Rather than obtaining appropriate thermometers, supervisors are using temperature guns designed to measure the temperature of a room or wall, not the body temperature of a human

being. The guns are marked “not for use on humans or animals” (or words to that effect). Their use to create a show of following CDC guidance makes a mockery of human life.

6. **Failure to Make Available Coronavirus Testing to Staff:** Despite working in a high-risk environment, Jail employees have no access to coronavirus testing. Symptomatic inmates are being tested, but not staff. The report of 20 staff members with positive tests (as of late last evening) simply must be a drastic undercount when employees cannot get tested.

According to a memo circulated on March 27, Cook County Health has erected tents outside Stroger Hospital and Provident Hospital to test employees for coronavirus. But it has not set up a tent or any other facility to test Cook County Health employees working at the Jail.

7. **Other Health and Safety Violations:**

- (a) Two officers in the intake unit report that inmates arriving at the Jail are being placed in crowded “bull pens” and open dorms, not single cells.

- (b) Cook County Health and Sheriff’s Office employees are not being provided with the information they need to lower the risk of contracting or spreading the virus. They are not told where inmates with pending tests or confirmed COVID-19 are being housed. The numbers are growing, and inmates with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 are housed all over the Jail. As of March 30, the planned quarantine unit in the former “boot camp” facility was not open, because the roof leaked. Most of the information officers and health care personnel receive is from the news media. The lack of information handicaps employees from taking proactive measures to protect themselves and monitor the health of inmates.

- (c) Front-line health care workers employed by Cook County Health have not been assured that, if they get sick or must self-isolate, they will be paid. Employees at high risk need revised duties to decrease potential exposure.

- (d) Officers and health care workers report that inmates have become increasingly verbally aggressive and agitated, because they too are afraid.

- (e) The Sheriff’s Office has ordered correctional officers to carry out the job duties of non-essential employees during the pandemic, putting the officers at even greater risk. Social workers and law librarians have been ordered to stay home four days out of five. Now, in addition to their security duties, officers must deliver and collect inmate grievance forms. Similarly, commissary workers are not permitted to enter onto the tier, so correctional officers must deliver commissary items to inmates. Officers engaged in all of this delivery and pick up of materials have no hand sanitizer, gloves, gowns, or face shields.

- (f) An employee reports seeing recruits from the training academy who were dispatched to the Jail before completing training. She observed them working

in direct contact with inmates with no masks or personal protective equipment of any kind.

These conditions reported by more than a dozen sworn officer and health care personnel at the Jail reflect a cavalier disregard of human life. They violate CDC guidelines for detention centers as well as common sense. Allowing these conditions to continue would be a moral outrage and lead to a public health disaster. These are human lives we are speaking of—the employees' and the detainees'.

All of the reporting health care workers believe they will contract coronavirus as a result of conditions at the Jail. They are fearful for themselves and their families, including elderly parents and family members with high-risk conditions. And as much as they are aware of the horrific risk to themselves, they believe conditions for corrections staff are even worse. The first-hand accounts we have received from inside the Jail reflect that the Sheriff's Office and Cook County Health have abandoned officers to their own devices during a pandemic that has already killed thousands of people across the country, including 99 in Illinois.

Sheriff Dart and President Preckwinkle: your critical employees at the Jail, responsible for the safety, security, and health care of inmates in detention, are justifiably terrified and angry. Each day they come to work, they literally risk their own lives and the lives of their families. We call upon you to carry out your public duties and responsibilities to protect human life at Cook County Jail. We are gravely concerned that a public health catastrophe is unfolding on your watch.

Sincerely,



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