



Monday, May 11, 2020

Governor Tom Wolf
Office of the Governor
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Secretary John E. Wetzel
Pennsylvania Department of Corrections
1920 Technology Pkwy
Mechanicsburg, PA 17050

Secretary Rachel Levine
Pennsylvania Department of Health Health and Welfare Building, 8th Floor
West 625 Forster Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Wolf, Secretary Wetzel, and Secretary Levine:

As the COVID-19 crisis continues in Pennsylvania, so does our concern regarding its impact on those behind bars or otherwise detained in congregate settings across the state. Many Pennsylvanians are extremely worried about loved ones of all ages who are incarcerated in jails, prisons, juvenile detention facilities and other out of home placements, where following social distancing guidelines is nearly impossible. The same is true of those who work in these facilities, their families and communities. We, the undersigned, share their concerns. In fact, we would go even further to stress that what occurs in those settings can impact all Pennsylvanians. It is clear to all by now that prisons, just like nursing homes, schools, colleges and other locations that you have worked hard to address are at heightened risk, which then can adversely impact the general population.

We are gravely concerned about the rising number of cases throughout the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. While SCI Phoenix and now SCI Huntingdon have confirmed cases in the double and triple digits, the lack of testing throughout the DOC means we cannot say with

any confidence that the virus is not spreading undetected. Given the very high risk for this population and for the hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians connected to it in one way or another, we are writing to request that the state make universal testing available to all people detained or employed in these facilities as testing supplies become more available. Since studies indicate that many people who have and can spread the virus are asymptomatic, this is the surest way to identify cases of infection and to allow authorities to take appropriate measures to protect public health.

Many other correctional facilities throughout the country have taken great strides to expand testing, with [several realizing universal testing within their facilities](#), and greatly increasing their ability to combat the virus through doing so. Montgomery County Correctional facility [recently tested every individual](#) held therein (938 in total). They discovered the contagion was 30 times more widespread than initial testing had shown, and a large majority of those testing positive were asymptomatic. Dauphin County Prison recently followed suit and [conducted facility-wide testing](#) (1,038 staff and incarcerated people) and discovered 13 positive cases that resulted in medical isolation of infected individuals and quarantining of those who were in close proximity to them.

Funding cannot and must not be a limiting factor. Under federal guidance for the use of the CARES Act, received funds can be used for "costs of providing COVID-19 testing, including serological testing" as well as "COVID-19-related expenses of maintaining state prisons and county jails, including as relates to sanitation and improvement of social distancing measures, to enable compliance with COVID-19 public health precautions."

Limiting the spread of COVID-19 in high-risk environments like the prison system is imperative for the health of incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, and our communities as a whole. The more incarcerated individuals and correctional staff that need treatment at local hospitals, the greater the strain will be on our health care system's capacity.

The organizations listed below represent a diverse cross section of Pennsylvanians supporting this request. We thank you and those who work with you for your service in this difficult time and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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