



April 3, 2020

Sheriff Jeff Dirkse  
Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department  
250 E. Hackett Road  
Modesto CA 95358

RE: COVID-19 and the Criminal Justice System

Dear Sheriff Dirkse:

Due to the ongoing crisis of coronavirus and COVID-19 disease in our community, this is to request that you immediately release sentenced individuals who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, unless there is clear evidence that release would present an unreasonable risk to the physical safety of the community, along with anyone who is already scheduled for release within the next 30 days. This also includes releasing people detained pretrial because they cannot afford to post bail. Furthermore, we urge you to take additional steps to reduce density and allow for social distancing among the remaining detainees.

Keeping such people in custody in the close quarters of the jail presents an imminent threat to health and safety of the detainees, sheriff's department personnel, and the public at large. Alternatives to cash bail such as own-recognition assessments and GPS monitoring will minimize risk of criminal conduct.

According to public health experts, people in close proximity or confined quarters such as meeting halls, public gatherings, cruise ships, and in this instance, jails, are at significantly increased risk of coronavirus infection, transmission to others via aerosol or surface contact, and contracting COVID-19 illness. Being incarcerated drastically limits a person's ability to exercise necessary hygiene precautions or to seek medical help. The longer jurisdictions wait to act, the worse this will be.

We urge you to partner with local public health officials in developing informed, immediately actionable steps to ensure that public safety and public health are protected. This must include preventing people from unnecessarily entering the criminal legal system in the first place and ensuring that prisons do not needlessly keep people incarcerated who are especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

Police must balance the need for arrest with the overwhelming public safety concerns presented by the coronavirus pandemic and limit the risk of potentially infecting public safety personnel, health providers, or the public. Police must cease arrests for low-level offenses and issue citations so that people can return home.

We urge you to ensure that the Stanislaus County jail and other local detention facilities are as empty, safe, and clean as possible. This means sanitizing facilities and coordinating with local public health officials to ensure that all facilities have adequate supplies of soap, sanitizer, paper and other hygiene products.

Sheriffs must implement procedures to care for those who become ill in their facilities. Those procedures must include, at a minimum: screening and testing of people for COVID-19, based on the most up to date information available, increased access to medical care, medication and equipment necessary to treat those who contract the virus, and the means to immediately transfer sick patients to outside facilities for care when necessary.

In addition, sheriffs must implement non-punitive procedures, without wide-spread lock downs, for housing people who are exposed to the virus or test positive for COVID-19.

Sheriffs must also suspend all practices of holding people in local jails and prisons for civil immigration purposes pursuant to a detention agreement between Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) or an ICE detainee.

Sheriffs must implement procedures to allow programming to continue; in jurisdictions where local health officials have urged limiting volunteer access to jails and prisons, this may mean allowing staff or incarcerated people to run programs. Similarly, visitations by family must not be limited unless public health officials urge such measures. If and when that does happen, limitations should be explicitly temporary and other forms of communication such as emails, voice calls, and video calls must be made free for all incarcerated people. Also, legal visits must not be curtailed.

Finally, Sheriffs must restructure staffing plans to ensure that facilities remain well-staffed even if staff are out sick and must educate staff on proper hygiene procedures both in and out of work.

The urgency of deliberate and thoughtful action cannot be overstated. We are eager to work with you to take the steps outlined above, and we are willing to be a resource for you throughout this process. We want to ensure implementation of policies that will limit the threats presented by this public health crisis.

Sincerely,

Tom Crain, Board Chair	Kiyah Lee, Finance Chair and Women's Advocacy Co-Chair
Patrick Kolasinski, Immigration Advocacy Chair	Thomas Helme, Communications Chair
Darleen Patrick, Women's Advocacy Co-Chair	Larry Giventer, Special Events Co-Chair
Mateo Maldonado, Special Events Co-Chair	Corey Ploutz, LGBTQ Advocacy Chair