



Durham CAN
(Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods)
732 Ninth Street, #604, Durham, NC 27705
(919) 627-1769 www.DurhamCAN.org

May 20, 2020

Clarence F. Birkhead
Sheriff, Durham County

Dear Sheriff Birkhead,

As our community continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we first want to thank you for your April 6 letter detailing the initial measures you took to prevent the spread of the virus in the Durham County Detention Center. After detention officer Alexander Pettaway, Jr.'s death from COVID-19 and several other officers testing positive for the disease, we write with continued concern for the safety of your employees and our incarcerated brothers and sisters. In addition to seeking information, we also want to know how we as a community can assist and support you in making the detention center as safe as possible.

Jails and prisons pose a great risk for the spread of COVID-19; there is a steady flow of staff and residents moving inside and outside of the facilities. In our detention center, there are numerous shared spaces that are potential hotspots for contracting the virus. In contrast to allegations in a recent lawsuit against the NC Department of Public Safety, we are grateful to acknowledge your practice of requiring face masks and temperature screening upon entry into the detention center; your isolation of new arrestees in the medical pod until they are cleared; and your forced distancing of residents in their rooms and throughout the day. We are confident that these measures have been essential in mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. However, because there have been confirmed cases in the detention center, we remain concerned about further spread. We expect that the detention center is still practicing social distancing, that face masks and gloves are readily available to all staff, and that residents are provided masks and other protective equipment when they are moved around or out of the facility.

While the above measures are useful in preventing an outbreak in the detention center, they are not enough. The consensus of public health officials is that testing is key to slowing the virus. Thus we ask:

1. Will you, to the extent possible, follow the Center for Disease Control recommendations in combating COVID-19?
2. Will you make testing available to all staff and residents?
3. How many residents have been tested for the virus? How many residents have tested positive?



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4. How many staff have been tested for the virus? How many staff have tested positive?
5. If testing is not available, will you make regular screening for COVID-19 a requirement?
6. Will you screen twice daily any staff or quarantined resident that has been exposed to an infected person?
7. Before release, will you ensure that any resident seeking testing be allowed such a test to prevent further spread of the virus to his or her family and community?
8. If you've answered no to any of the above questions, why?

Please note that we have not asked anything that would require you to violate any privacy laws in answering, consistent with the type of publicly available, de-identified [Offender-Related COVID-19 Data](#) currently provided by the North Carolina Department of Safety. Further, we understand that the resources available to you may be limited, and we ask you for transparent answers if such is the case.

Our Criminal Justice Reform Action Team plans on conducting an online meeting the week beginning Tuesday, May 26. We invite you to join our team to discuss these questions and any additional concerns about the situation you would like to share. We will do our best to accommodate your schedule. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Durham Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods