



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

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April 3, 2020

Clarence F. Birkhead  
Sheriff, Durham County

Dear Sheriff Birkhead,

As our community prepares for the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we at Durham CAN write to share our concerns and priorities regarding our brothers and sisters in the Durham County Detention Facility. In addition to communicating our agenda, we write in a spirit of cooperation, with an invitation to please let us know how we as a community can assist you and your staff in securing the necessary resources to protect the men and women in your custody.

The detention facility is a closed facility; the men and women inside are particularly vulnerable to a virus outbreak. We are aware of media reports that despite the impending danger, Governor Cooper has informed Sheriffs across the state that the NC Department of Public Safety will not assist county jails with housing or treating any residents who contract COVID-19. Because Durham County already has one of the larger coronavirus infection rates in the state, we are especially worried about the limited healthcare resources that will be available when men and women in the detention facility begin getting sick.

Some of our concerns are related to measures to prevent an outbreak. While remote visits from friends and family are not ideal, under the circumstances we commend your provision of free remote visits to residents. We also commend your practices of screening staff each day, and of screening and isolating new arrestees in the medical pod until they have been cleared. We hope that with the recently reduced jail population you are keeping residents safe distances apart. We hope that you are educating residents and staff about the coronavirus and symptoms of COVID-19 and teaching them steps they can take to minimize the chances of contracting or spreading the virus. We hope that you are providing residents with free soap and alcohol-based hand sanitizer. We hope that the Detention Facility is being thoroughly and regularly cleaned and sanitized. Finally, we hope that you are ordering your staff to remain home (with pay) if they are in any way symptomatic.

Thus we ask the following questions with the understanding that you may not control every outcome and with an invitation to let us know where we and others in the community can help you achieve best outcomes:



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1. Have you and the Durham Department of Public Health and/or Duke University Health System been communicating about and planning for an outbreak in the detention facility?
2. Do you plan to move seriously ill residents to a hospital to ensure they receive the best care possible?
3. Will you avoid large-scale lockdowns or solitary confinement where targeted quarantines of sick individuals will suffice?
4. What is the capacity for quarantining residents who do get sick, i.e., is there a number of sick inmates that would be too many for you to safely separate?
5. Will you ensure that that all measures taken at the detention facility will comport with the due process rights of the residents?
6. Finally, will you ensure that residents receive quality healthcare regardless of health insurance or ability to pay?

While the above measures are consistent with best practices in preventing the spread of a virus, we understand that they may not prevent an outbreak in the detention facility. Of course our hope is that you will be able to ensure that all of the men and women in your facility will receive the quality healthcare they require if they get sick. We recognize that the provision of such healthcare is a worry for everyone across the country. We understand that your job is a difficult one under normal circumstances. In the face of a pandemic, charged with the safety and security of approximately 300 of our brothers and sisters in addition to that of your staff, and with stretched resources across all levels of government, we know your job is that much more difficult. We hope that you will take into consideration our concerns about the treatment of the people in your custody, and that you will share with us anything that you believe we can do to assist your work. We would be grateful for a response at your convenience, and an opportunity to discuss this with you, with the understanding that such a conversation should not be your immediate priority.

Sincerely,

Durham Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods