



March 10, 2020

Via email and U.S. first-class mail to:

Steve Kopelman
Executive Director, New Mexico Association of Counties
444 Galisteo St
Santa Fe, NM 87501
skopelman@nmcounties.org

Re: COVID-19 Preparation and Response

Dear Director Kopelman:

We are writing to urge you to immediately develop evidence-based and proactive plans for the prevention and management of COVID-19 within all New Mexico county jails. We are requesting a written response detailing your plans to protect the health of the people in county custody and the people who work in county jails.

People in jails are highly vulnerable to outbreaks of contagious illnesses. They are housed in close quarters and are often in poor health. Without the active engagement of jail administrators, they have little ability to inform themselves about preventive measures, or to take such measures if they do manage to learn of them.

We ask that you immediately reach out to the New Mexico Department of Health to develop plans to address the virus in conjunction with county facility administrators. This is an urgent matter. Having an appropriate, evidence-based plan in place can help prevent an outbreak and minimize its impact if one does occur. Not having one may cost lives.

While the plan should be developed collaboratively between county jail administrators and the New Mexico Department of Health, some of the critical issues that must be addressed are:

- **Education of the people in your custody:** People housed in jails need to be informed about the virus and the measures they can take to minimize their risk of contracting or spreading the virus. They must be educated on the importance of proper handwashing, coughing into their elbows, and social distancing to the extent they can. Information about the spread of the virus, the risks associated with it, and prevention and treatment measures must be based on the best available science.
- **Education of the staff:** Correctional, administrative, and medical staff all must be educated about the virus to protect themselves and their families, as well as the people in their custody.

- **Staffing plans:** Regardless of how many staff stay home because they are sick, the jails will have to continue functioning. There must be a plan for how necessary functions and services will continue if large numbers of staff are out with the virus.
- **Staffing plans for services provided by inmates:** Many tasks in jails, such as food preparation and basic sanitation, are performed by inmates. The plans for an outbreak must also address how necessary tasks performed by inmates will continue if large numbers of inmates are ill.
- **Provision of hygiene supplies:** The most basic aspect of infection control is hygiene. There must be ready access to warm water and adequate hygiene supplies, both for handwashing and for cleaning.
- **Screening and testing of the people in your custody:** The plan must include guidance, based on the best science available, on how and when to screen and test people in county facilities for the virus.
- **Housing of persons exposed to the virus:** The plan must describe how and where people in the jails will be housed if they are exposed to the virus, are at high risk of serious illness if they become infected, or become sick with it. *This should not result in prolonged, widespread lock-downs.* Any lock-downs or interruptions in regular activities, such as exercise or visits and phone calls with families or attorneys, should be based solely on the best science available and should be as limited as possible in scope and duration.
- **Treatment:** Courses of treatment must be evidence-based, available immediately, and in compliance with scientifically-based public health protocols.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** The plan must provide for additional precautions for those who are at high risk of serious illness if they are infected, such as pregnant women and people with chronic illnesses, compromised immune systems, or disabilities.
- **Data collection:** The collection of data regarding COVID-19 will be part of the public health response. As with any contagious disease, data collection is critical to understanding and fighting the virus. The jail system must be part of this process. The same information that is tracked in the community must be tracked in the jails.

Please provide us with a written response within one week of receiving this letter.

Sincerely,



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CC:

New Mexico Department of Health
Cabinet Secretary Kathy Kunkel
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Bernalillo County Metropolitan Detention Center
Chief of Corrections Ralph Fernandez
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Bernalillo County Youth Services Center
Director Craig Sparks
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Catron County Detention Center
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Cibola County Detention Center
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Curry County Adult Detention Center
Curry County Juvenile Detention Center
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De Baca County Detention Center
Administrator Lynita Lovorn

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Doña Ana Adult County Detention Center
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Eddy County Detention Center
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Hidalgo County Detention Center
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Lea County Adult Detention Center
Lea County Juvenile Detention Center
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Los Alamos County Detention Center
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Luna County Adult Detention Center
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McKinley County Adult Detention Center
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Otero County Detention Center
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Sandoval County Detention Center
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San Juan County Adult Detention Center
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San Juan County Juvenile Detention
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Santa Fe County Youth Development Program
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Sierra County Detention Center
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Rio Arriba County Detention Center
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Roosevelt County Detention Center
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