



March 25, 2020

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We are calling on you to act immediately to protect the health and safety of youth currently confined in juvenile halls and probation camps in Los Angeles County. As you are well aware, the spread of COVID-19 is the gravest threat to public health that any of us have seen in our lifetimes.

As the attorneys and advocates representing many of these children, we are alarmed by reports we are receiving about the unhealthy conditions for them in these facilities. The most pressing concerns are system-wide reports that social distancing is not being enforced by probation officers who supervise the children. At the probation camps, it is our understanding that youth are still housed in crowded dormitory settings and that the “six foot rule” is neither explained nor enforced. Youth are not provided any guidance regarding hand washing. They are not told to refrain from touching their face.

In the juvenile halls, the situation is much the same. Even though youth are not housed in dormitory settings, there is no guidance being given regarding social distancing, and no guidance regarding hand washing. Youth do not have consistent access to soap, water, and hand sanitizer. Youth who show symptoms of any illness are only treated to medical attention if they fill out a form on their own initiative – it is not automatic.

The hundreds of youths in these facilities need more help. Circumstances have placed them in a peculiar situation where they have limited access to their advocates – their families are now prohibited from visiting, and in-person attorney access has been limited.

We turn to you to protect our most vulnerable youth from COVID-19.

During a pandemic, your agencies have the authority to “issue orders to other governmental entities within the local health officer’s jurisdiction *to take any action the local health officer deems necessary to control the spread of the communicable disease.*” Health and Safety Code Section 120175.5(b). We ask you to invoke your broad authority under this law.

WE ASK YOU TO DIRECT YOUR AGENCY TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

- Inspect and continuously monitor all juvenile halls and probation camps and take all necessary measures to ensure that the Los Angeles County Probation Department follows all COVID-19 protocols.
- Order a reduction of the population of the juvenile halls and probation camps by urging the release of anyone who does not pose an unreasonable safety risk to a specific person or persons, and by urging local law enforcement not to make new arrests for any crimes that do not pose an unreasonable safety risk to a specific person or persons.
- Direct all probation camps and juvenile halls to prioritize children’s contact with their family during this crisis. Because family visits are suspended for the foreseeable future, detained youth are suffering tremendous psychological distress and need to be able to connect with their families frequently. For their health, safety, and well-being, the Probation Department should implement meaningful methods of consistent communication between the children and their families to every extent feasible, whether it be more phone calls or virtual visits.
- For youth who are wards of the dependency court, the Department of Health should urge greater interagency communication and cooperation between Probation and the Department of Child and Family Services to ensure these youths are not abandoned in these facilities due to the quarantine.

The time for action is now. On Sunday, March 22, the Los Angeles Superior Court announced there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the Sylmar Juvenile Courthouse. This courthouse is attached to one the juvenile halls.

We know how seriously you take your duty to protect the lives of people living and working in the County’s facilities and the surrounding communities. The health, well-being and indeed the lives of these people are in your hands. We urge you to take immediate and decisive action now to save lives. We will support you in taking the bold but necessary action now to protect the health of people in our community, including the most vulnerable.

Sincerely,

Jerod Gunsberg, Attorney at Law
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Loyola Law School Center for Juvenile Law and Policy
Children’s Defense Fund – California
Los Angeles County Public Defender Union Local 148
ACLU of Southern California
National Center for Youth Law
National Lawyers Guild of Los Angeles
LA Progressive
LA Voice
Dignity & Power Now
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace
Reform I.A. Jails

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Black Jewish Justice Alliance
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Inside Out Writers
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Creating Justice Los Angeles
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