

Public Statement on COVID-19 and the Incarceration of Immunocompromised People

4/13/2020

Equitas Health, as a member of the Ohio HIV Modernization Movement (OHMM), supports every effort to prioritize the public health and safety of Ohioans during the international crisis and uncertainty of COVID-19. We believe proactive public health strategies are the most effective way to address the challenges of this global pandemic.

Stakeholders in the law enforcement and judiciary communities play a crucial role in supporting these efforts by taking every action possible to reduce the strain on correctional resources. This includes ensuring people who are immunocompromised are not placed at greater risk by needless incarceration in hazardous conditions.

Local corrections departments must work together with local public health departments, other City agencies, and County partners to undertake a review of prison and jail populations to identify individuals who are at greater risk of death or long-term health consequences from COVID-19. We support the common sense solution proposed by OHMM:

1. Immediate release of all non-violent individuals at higher risk of harm from COVID-19 infection, including people over 60, and those with underlying health conditions that infectious disease experts say increase their risk, e.g., lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, or a compromised immune system;
2. Rapidly decrease incarcerated populations by releasing people detained pre-trial, people detained for administrative reasons, including failure to appear or parole violations, and people serving a sentence of a year or less; and
3. Cease arrests for offenses outlined in Ohio Rev. Code § 2903.11(B)(1), Ohio Rev. Code § 2907.24, Ohio Rev. Code § 241, Ohio Rev. Code § 2907.25, Ohio Rev. Code § 2921.38, and Ohio Rev. Code § 2929.14 that rely on an individual's HIV status as proof of intent to harm, as well as all low level offenses.

The environmental conditions of prisons and jails are known to amplify the transmission risk of infectious and contagious diseases like COVID-19.[1] Dr. Anne Spaulding, who heads the Emory University Center for the Health of Incarcerated Persons, recently compared conditions inside prisons and jails to cruise ships where COVID-19 infections have spread rapidly.[2] The health and safety of all incarcerated persons, and particularly those who are immunocompromised, officers, and staff is paramount in decreasing the strain on resources within the correctional system once the full impact of the virus is felt.