



March 10, 2021

Via Email

Sheriff Anthony Cureton
Undersheriff Orestes Alvarez
Bergen County Jail
160 S. River St,
Hackensack, NJ 07601

RE: COVID-19 Vaccination Access at the Bergen County Jail

Dear Sheriff Cureton:

On behalf of the three organizations that comprise the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project and the people we represent who are held in civil immigration detention at the Bergen County Jail (“BCJ” or “Facility”), we write seeking information about the facility’s plan to provide COVID-19 vaccine access to the many people in immigration detention, as well as others detained and employed at the facility. We are concerned by the lack of information available to people in immigration detention, their attorneys, or to the public, about whether, when, and how the jail plans to ensure vaccine access for people living and working in a confined setting with a high risk of COVID-19 transmission. We ask that you provide details regarding BCJ’s plan to ensure vaccine access to people detained or employed at the facility. Any such plan should include educational and informational resources to ensure that all individuals can make informed decisions about their medical care. To the extent that there is no plan yet in place to provide vaccine access to these individuals, we urge you to develop one as soon as possible to protect the health and safety of those at the facility and in the community beyond.

The need for COVID-19 vaccine access at jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities like BCJ is clear.¹ Jails, by their very nature as congregate settings, are already prone to outbreak of infectious disease.² Individuals in these facilities live, sleep, and eat in close proximity to one

¹ See, e.g., Emily Wang et al., *Recommendations for Prioritization and Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccine in Prisons and Jails*, Dec. 16, 2020,

https://justicelab.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/COVID_Vaccine_White_Paper.pdf; Aviva Stahl, *Prisons have already failed to contain Covid-19. What happens when the new variants arrive?*, VOX, Jan. 30, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/22256219/covid-19-new-variants-prisons-jails-vaccines-masks>.

² Laura Hawks, MD, et al, *COVID-19 in Prisons and Jails in the United States*, 180(8) JAMA Intern Med. 1041 (August 2020), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/article-abstract/2765271> (“The infrastructure of most prisons and jails is ... conducive to spreading disease. Moreover, people who are incarcerated

another. The most basic precautions to prevent spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing and use of personal protective equipment, are nearly impossible in these settings. Immigration detention facilities have proven particularly vulnerable to outbreak, with rates of infection 13.4 times higher than the general population.³

In light of the increased threat that COVID-19 poses in congregate settings like BCJ, public health experts—including those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—have nearly uniformly urged policymakers to ensure that people in detention facilities be prioritized for COVID-19 vaccine access. Indeed, the federal government, specifically the Federal Bureau of Prisons, developed a plan to provide vaccine access to staff and individuals who are incarcerated in federal correctional facilities, delivering vaccines to more than half such facilities in the country by mid-January 2021.⁴ In contrast, it is not clear whether BCJ has even begun offering vaccinations to those detained in the facility.

Beyond access, any vaccination plan at BCJ must also include education about the vaccine being offered. It was recently reported that at the Hudson County Jail, half of the detainees opted not to get the vaccine when it was offered, many reporting that no information about the shot was provided.⁵ Without information and education, low acceptance should not be surprising. It is broadly accepted that additional education and resources are necessary as part of a vaccine roll out plan particularly in communities of color, where people are often distrustful of new medical treatments because of a history of medical experimentation.⁶ The same is true for people detained or incarcerated in carceral settings, like BCJ. Beyond the historical context, people detained or incarcerated have had limited access to information throughout the pandemic, often turning to our office, friends, and family outside of the facility for the most basic information. Further, the hierarchical constraints inherent in carceral settings like the Bergen County Jail, which may include distrust of health authorities, must be considered in developing any meaningful plan to make vaccines accessible to those in immigration detention.

We ask that you respond to this letter by March 15, 2021, explaining how you intend to provide access to the COVID-19 vaccine to people detained at the Bergen County Jail, including but not limited to clarifying:

1. How are people detained or employed at the Bergen County Jail identified and prioritized, in comparison to each other, in the distribution plan?

will be at higher risk of exposure, as correctional officers and other staff frequently leave the facility and then return. In prisons and jails, social distancing is typically a physical impossibility.”).

³ Parsa Erfani, et al., *COVID-19 Testing and Cases in Immigration Detention Centers*, 325(2) JAMA 182–184 (October 2020), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2772627>.

⁴ Federal Bureau of Prisons, *COVID-19 Vaccination Efforts Commended* (Jan. 16, 2021) available at bop.gov/resources/news/20210116_covid_vaccine_efforts_commended.jsp.

⁵ Daniel Parra, *COVID-19 Vaccination Begins in Hudson County Jail, But Half of ICE Detainees Refused*, City Limits, Feb. 9, 2021, <https://citylimits.org/2021/02/09/covid-19-vaccination-begins-in-hudson-county-jail-but-half-of-ice-detainees-refused/>.

⁶ See Pien Huang, *You Can't Treat If You Can't Empathize: Black Doctors Tackle Vaccine Hesitancy*, NPR, Jan. 19, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/01/19/956015308/you-cant-treat-if-you-cant-empathize-black-doctors-tackle-vaccine-hesitancy>.

2. Can people request to receive the vaccine, or do they have to wait to be identified by the Facility?
3. What efforts, if any, are being made to secure vaccines?
4. Which county and jail officials are tasked with COVID-19 vaccine distribution at the Bergen County Jail?
5. What plans exist to ensure that individuals who are released after receiving an initial vaccine dose while detained are able to obtain a timely second dose of the vaccine following release?
6. What information and education will be provided to people detained at the Bergen County Jail regarding the COVID-19 vaccine?
7. What, if any, opportunities are being made available for individuals at the Bergen County Jail to ask questions about the vaccine?
8. Who, if anyone, is designated to provide information and answer questions about the vaccine at the Bergen County Jail?

We are available to provide more information or, to the extent possible, to work with you to ensure the broadest vaccine access for the people we serve. Please contact Ellen Pachnanda by email at epachnanda@bds.org or phone at 347-633-4166, for further information or with questions. We look forward to hearing from you on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Ellen Pachnanda, Supervising Attorney
New York Immigrant Family Unity Project
Brooklyn Defender Services

Hasan Shafiqullah
Attorney-in-Charge, Immigration Law Unit
The Legal Aid Society

Sarah Deri Oshiro
Managing Director, Immigration Practice
The Bronx Defenders