

MICAH's Public Comments to the Shelby County Commission
May 13, 2020

Comment #1

Submitted by Meggan Kiel on behalf of Immigration & Intercultural Equity Task Force
MICAH (Memphis Interfaith Coalition for Action and Hope)

QUESTION: While there is currently strong access to testing in Shelby County as well as CDC guidance giving priority for testing asymptomatic residents of "congregate housing settings," why does Shelby County continue to report that there are zero COVID-19 cases in the Division of Corrections without implementing mass testing? Why is Division of Corrections last in line for testing in our community while they are at very high risk due to dorm style living? Will any county commissioners stand with MICAH as we raise our voices for this population not to be deprioritized by our community?

COMMENT:

MICAH would like to thank the chair of this committee, Commissioner Turner, for connecting MICAH with Dr. Haushalter at your last committee meeting. We were able to meet with Dr. Haushalter and Director Alexander over Zoom last Wednesday. While we were able to have an initial conversation regarding testing and safeguarding the 1,561 individuals who are incarcerated at the Division of Correction, we did leave the conversation with questions that we would like to continue to share with the County Commission since the Division is under the purview of the county.

While Shelby County is now focused on the robust testing and metrics required for "re-opening" there is a part of our community that continues to be left out of that conversation - those at Shelby County Division of Corrections ("The Penal Farm"), which is not under Sheriff Bonner but is under Director Alexander who was appointed by Mayor Harris.

In response to MICAH's request for transparency regarding COVID-19 in the Shelby County Division of Corrections, Mayor Harris' office posted on Facebook on May 4th that there were 9 employees and zero incarcerated individuals who were "confirmed COVID-19" cases. MICAH asked Dr. Haushalter and Director Alexander about this on our May 6th call and were told that "We [Shelby County Health Department] have not done additional testing at Division of Corrections because we've not had need to actually expand testing in that facility." **How do we confirm that there are indeed zero cases if there is not testing?^[SEP] Have none of the 1,500+ individuals reported any symptoms to Wellpath that would have then required testing?**

In yesterday's press briefing Dr. Haushalter stated that, "We're confident in Shelby County that there is sufficient access to testing for those health care workers who need it as well as community members who need testing as well" as well as that "we have plenty of capacity in Shelby County for individuals to get tested." **However, while there is plenty of capacity, the Division of Corrections seems to be the very last in line for that testing, even though they are in a high priority group due to dorm-style living.** New CDC guidance from May 3 states that those in congregate housing (even without symptoms) are the highest priority for testing. Is

the current invitation to be tested regardless of symptoms in Shelby County being extended to incarcerated populations, and if so, how is that being communicated?

In my work with MICAH, I am grounded by the verses in the book of Proverbs which instructs us to "raise our voices on behalf of the vulnerable and downtrodden." (Proverbs 31:8-9) The urgency of this pandemic literally means life or death for many who are "vulnerable and downtrodden." Their sentences do not include heightened exposure to a life-threatening disease without receiving the testing being offered to the rest of the community. **MICAH will continue to "raise our voices" to bring the Division of Corrections into the conversations of testing for our *entire* community, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to act on behalf of the most vulnerable populations in Shelby County.**

COMMENT #2

Submitted by Janiece J. Lee on behalf of Immigration & Intercultural Equity Task Force MICAH (Memphis Interfaith Coalition for Action and Hope)

Question: Given the recent CDC guidelines that testing priority be given to those individuals without *symptoms* who have "residency in congregate housing settings," why has priority not been given to those who are currently being housed under the care and custody of the Shelby County Division of Corrections? When will testing be conducted for the population at the Shelby County Division of Corrections?

Comment: Eight of the top ten Coronavirus hotspots in the United States are in prisons and jails and yet in Shelby County, the health department has focused and prioritized the testing of the incarcerated populations at 201 Poplar and Jail East, neglecting to conduct testing at the Shelby County Division of Corrections (SCDC) which houses more than 1,500 men and women of Shelby County. Those being held at SCDC live in open dormitories housing 40 bunks, all open to one another, without the ability to social distance or isolate. They live and function shoulder to shoulder with those in their housing units.

Mass testing at 201 Poplar occurred only after detainees had been hospitalized and a jailer had died from COVID-19. We have currently been made aware that at least nine employees/contract labor from the SCDC have tested positive for COVID-19 thus far. Will it take hospitalizations or death for the same priority to be made for testing at SCDC?

The lack of care and priority for those being held at SCDC as well as for those who work at SCDC is disturbing. The people being housed at SCDC are our brothers and sisters, our fathers and mothers, our daughters and sons. These are our neighbors and they will be returning to live and work beside us when they complete their sentences. Rather than treating them with the same priority of other residents, we are turning our backs on them and devaluing them - we are throwing them away and suggesting it does not matter if they get sick with COVID-19.

Instead of celebrating the current figure of 0 positive tests at SCDC, we ask that the Shelby County Health Department be questioned as to why there are 0 tests being done within the population at SCDC. We call upon the health department to prioritize testing at SCDC and to

immediately begin mass testing at the SCDC facilities for both the men and women being housed there.

In my faith tradition, we are called to "Remember those in prison as if you were bound with them." (Hebrews 13:3) I suggest we all lean into this scripture. We align ourselves with our incarcerated brothers and sisters who have no control over their current environment and who live in fear and anxiety about exposure to COVID-19. We are called to treat each and every one with humanity and dignity, for they are all image bearers of our God. We must not turn our backs on them, we cannot allow them to be sentenced to COVID-19 simply because of our failure to act.

Thank you and kindest regards.