

Public Comment For Hospitals and Health Committee 4.29.20 (submitted by Meggan Kiel)

Q: As we look to care for all within Shelby County as we face the coronavirus pandemic head-on, MICAH calls upon the County Commission to immediately and urgently press for mass testing among the incarcerated population, staff, correctional officers and contracted labor at Shelby County Division of Corrections. Will you do so?

We have also heard from families of the SCDC incarcerated population that despite the reports that the incarcerated population has been issued masks, that that is not what they are hearing from their family members. Can you press for specific information from SCDC regarding if and how masks are being issued?

Comment:

We have heard about mass COVID-19 testing of the incarcerated population in the custody of the Shelby County Sheriff's Office and certain facilities within the Tennessee Department of Correction. We have not heard of any proactive testing plan from the Shelby County Division of Corrections. While MICAH has been asking Director Alexander for information since April 7, we have yet to hear any response about his division's procedures, protocol, or planning to protect the health of both the incarcerated population and the personnel. While we have heard from Mayor Harris's office that there have been no cases of COVID-19 in the incarcerated population and 14 cases among the SCDC personnel and contract labor, they were not able to provide us with how many have been tested. When asked why there had not been mass testing, the mayor's office said that that was a decision for the health professionals in the facility and not the Mayor or the Director.

If there is, as we have been told:

- zero cases in the incarcerated population to date but 14 in the personnel/contracted labor at SCDC,
- more readily available COVID-19 testing,
- a desire on behalf of the Shelby County Health Department to proactively test thousands in the county daily, and
- a requirement that the decision to test within the SCDC comes from the Health Department or health professionals,

MICAH calls upon the County Commission to ask the Shelby County Health Department and the health professionals within the Shelby County Division of Corrections to proactively conduct mass testing for those who work and are incarcerated in Shelby County Division of Corrections and their facilities.

As we have seen across the nation and across the state, prisons and other group living homes are ground zero for the spread of COVID-19. One prison in Tennessee has announced nearly 600 cases of COVID-19 and that facility's medical director believes that 99% of those cases came from an infected staff person. Before such an outbreak reaches the population under the care and custody of the SCDC under your charge, we encourage you to demand mass testing since it seems to us that neither the Mayor nor the Director is.

For the safety of all of those in SCDC and the greater community it is imperative that a) masks are provided to everyone in SCDC and b) we know now who has and doesn't have the virus proactively rather than reactively. We are asking for the County Commission to press for both masks and mass testing since we are not currently hearing of any requests from the Mayor or the Director.

Together for the health of our community,
MICAH Immigration & Intercultural Equity Task Force

Public Comment For Law Enforcement, Fire, Corrections, and Courts Committee 4.29.20 (submitted by Janiece Lee)

Q: Since April 7, 2020, MICAH has reached out to Shelby County Division of Corrections Director Anthony Alexander to provide transparency and public communications around the procedures and policies “in place to safeguard the health and well being of the incarcerated” and the staff at SCDC; however, there have been little to no efforts from the SCDC to be transparent and/or to communicate with those in its care and custody, their families, or the community at large. **We call upon you to demand transparency and answers from SCDC and Director Alexander during this critical time.**

Comments:

On April 7, 2020, MICAH reached out to Shelby County Division of Corrections Director Anthony Alexander asking for his office to:

“immediately release the procedures in place to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the incarcerated, including those who have tested positive, those who have been potentially exposed to the virus, and those who remain asymptomatic. MICAH asks for transparency as to how the detention centers are creating safe, quarantined space within otherwise crowded, communal environments...”

MICAH's request was ignored. On April 15, 2020, we sent a follow-up email to Director Alexander asking for a conference call to address these issues. We did not hear from Director Alexander, but in speaking with Mayor Lee Harris on April 22, 2020, were assured we would get answers to the many questions MICAH and the community have following rampant rumors of illness and even death at SCDC. While we have received some of the information from the Mayor's office on the afternoon of April 28th, there were limits to what their office was able to answer. We have yet to receive a response from the Division of Corrections.

MICAH continues its call for transparency, its call for humanity, its call for equity for all, including the incarcerated and their families during this pandemic. **SCDC has failed to provide any public information related to its facilities, its staff, and those who are in the care and custody of the Shelby County Division of Corrections.** We have not been able to find any press releases, public statements, or social media posts from SCDC. A lack of response and transparency regarding the health of those entrusted to the Division of Corrections only reinforces the impression that those incarcerated and their loved ones are less deserving than others.

Our faith teachings have emphasized that we should recognize and uphold the marginalized, the vulnerable, the left out and left behind. During this pandemic, our incarcerated brothers and sisters are extremely vulnerable and rather than being recognized for their humanity, they are judged solely on their past indiscretions and discarded by society. When we dehumanize them, though, we are only dehumanizing ourselves.

We ask you to demand transparency and answers from SCDC and Director Alexander, and MICAH is happy to provide you with the full list of questions submitted regarding SCDC if you so desire.

Together in Action,
MICAH's Immigration & Intercultural Equity Task Force

Public Comment for Community Services Committee Meeting (submitted by Gisela Guerrero)

On Monday, April 27 the public was made aware of the Shelby County COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund. On that same day, MICAH wrote to the Division of Community Services to ask "if there are any plans for the application to be translated into other languages so that all Shelby County residents could have access?" In an email response, we learned that if someone called and left a voicemail in Spanish, they would receive a call back with a Spanish speaking employee to assist in filling out the application. However, this was not noted on the website or the application itself. There was also no advice on assistance with any other of the languages spoken in our county. As of this morning, we have found that the application for funding is at least closed temporarily due to the overwhelming response in initial applicants. This all happened before the application was ever translated into any other language. This is an equity of access issue, and the division reported to us that they have lost their Spanish speaking staff member and are under a hiring freeze. How will the division be able to reach out to and serve the limited English proficient population in Shelby County for any future relief initiatives to ensure language is not yet another barrier?

MICAH Immigration & Intercultural Equity Task Force