



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 30, 2019

Contact: Madison Kaigh, Communications Manager
(512) 441-8123 Ext. 108 | MKaigh@TexasCJC.org

**Texas Criminal Justice Coalition Releases Urgent Statement Regarding
Texas Governor Greg Abbott's Executive Order Suspending Jail Release for Thousands of Texans**

AUSTIN, TX — Today, in response to an executive order issued by Governor Greg Abbott, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition released the following statement:

“Contrary to the advice of public health experts, legal experts, and sheriffs across the country, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued an [executive order](#) on Sunday that suspends basic constitutional protections for people detained in county jail and puts thousands of people – many of whom have chronic illness – at grave risk of contracting COVID-19. The order suspends judicial authority to issue personal bonds to anyone detained in county jail who has a prior conviction involving physical violence or threat of violence.

Texas jails house roughly 68,000 people, more than 40,000 of whom are legally innocent awaiting trial. The Governor's order applies to anyone detained, regardless of offense, who has a prior conviction, even if that conviction was decades old or relatively minor in nature. What this means, for example, is that a low-income person who is currently detained in jail on a nonviolent charge, like possession of a small quantity of a controlled substance, must remain in jail simply because they have a decades-old conviction for a relatively minor offense, such as misdemeanor assault.

At the same time, anyone with a similar history who can afford to pay a bail bond can be released. This clearly undermines the Governor's argument that releasing people will threaten public safety. Furthermore, because the order suspends the right to a speedy trial, it means that low-income people – the majority of jail detainees – will remain in jail indefinitely.

Jails are a petri dish for viral infection. Anyone who contracts the virus will spread it quickly to others – officers and detained individuals alike. The executive order guarantees a public health emergency inside jails, and it also increases the risk to the general public as people complete their sentences and are released back to the community carrying the virus. Our health care systems will face a further onslaught of cases.

The order will also make Texas jails far less safe. As officers and staff members contract the illness, they will not be able to work. Understaffed jails in the time of a public health emergency are a nightmare scenario. This is not hypothetical: Rikers Island and jails across the country are experiencing this crisis.

--MORE--

Last week, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition and scores of organizations sent an [urgent statement](#) to Governor Abbott asking him to immediately reduce jail populations and protect those still detained. We asked for people to sign a [petition](#) supporting this guidance, and thousands of Texans have already signed. In jail, days of delay could mean death – and Governor Abbott’s executive order halts the release of thousands of low-risk individuals, most of whom are not convicted of a crime.

We urge the Governor to rescind this executive order and immediately direct county officials to reduce their jail populations as safely and as quickly as possible.”

###

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) advances solutions and builds coalitions to end mass incarceration and build safer Texas communities. To learn more about TCJC, visit www.TexasCJC.org.