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For immediate release:

Huntsville Bail Fund Raises Grave Concerns About Madison County Jail
Confiscating masks in the age of COVID-19, and other civil rights violations.

Huntsville, Alabama - In the [latest press conference regarding COVID 19](#), Governor Ivey and the Alabama Department of Public Health called for citizens to take responsibility and use common sense to slow the spread of the virus - wear a mask, practice social distancing, wash your hands, and use hand sanitizer. But not everyone has the ability to take those preventative measures; inmates of Alabama's jails and prisons are only as safe as the officials in charge of those facilities will allow them to be. In many areas, including Madison County, those officials are carelessly putting inmates at an extremely high risk of contracting a disease that may very well kill them.

According to the most recent data collected by [The Marshall Project for the year 2017](#), Madison County Jail's average daily population was 838, the turnover of booked and released people averaged at 272 per week. With almost a third of the total jail population churning in and out, it is only a matter of time before COVID-19 gains a foothold in the jail and becomes a hotspot to carry COVID-19 into the greater community. It is already well established that prisons and jails [quickly become epicenters of disease outbreak](#), due to their enclosed and often overcrowded nature. Alabama Department of Corrections is intimately familiar with this problem, having experienced a vaccine-preventable, antibiotic-treatable [pneumococcal outbreak in late 2018](#) that left at least one prisoner dead.

Further compounding these concerns, Madison County Sheriff's Office has apparently maintained Jail procedures which are known to actively promote the spread of COVID-19 within the greater community. The Huntsville Bail Fund say that concerns include:

- Confiscation of personal masks and other face coverings from individuals in detention upon booking, coupled with failure to provide an appropriate face covering [as recommended by the Centers of Disease Control](#).
- Failure to require or enforce face masks or face coverings for all personnel while on duty at Madison County Jail.
- Failure to implement [CDC-recommended social distancing](#) throughout the arrest process, requiring detained individuals from separate households to sit shoulder-to-shoulder for extended periods through booking and holding.

- Failure to provide access to even the most basic sanitation or hygiene supplies to detained individuals. Detention bathrooms lack hand sanitizer, hand soap, toilet paper, and paper towels.

Tahirih Osborne, Organizer for the recently-formed Huntsville Bail Fund, says the solutions are obvious, and have already been successful in jails across the state and the country.

“Immediately correcting these harmful policies is the absolute bare minimum the Jail could do to mitigate spread. HPD already possesses the ability to immediately issue notices to appear for many nonviolent and misdemeanor offenses, in lieu of arrest and booking. Why purposely and unnecessarily detain individuals, and willingly expose the community to more infection risk?” [An Alabama judge recently ordered](#) Autauga, Chilton, and Elmore counties to release individuals with bonds set at less than \$5,000. “There is no reason we couldn’t choose to do the same here,” said Osborne.

Huntsville Bail Fund has additionally received reports of major civil rights violations at Madison County Jail, above and beyond the concerns around COVID-19. “We want Madison County Sheriff’s Office and Huntsville Police Department to explain these failures to protect the constitutionally-protected rights of citizens in custody.” These reported violations have included:

- Huntsville Police questioning detained individuals without providing a Miranda warning. Many released individuals report never receiving such a warning between the time of arrest and time of release.
- Huntsville Police denying requests for counsel during the course of questioning.
- Refusal to provide adequate medical care as requested by detained individuals, for injuries sustained immediately prior to or during arrest.

Says Osborne, “These issues are emblematic of the reasons why protests against police brutality are happening in the first place. Punishment does not begin with a guilty conviction in our system. It begins at arrest, and only gets worse from there. People lose their jobs, their homes, and their health because of arrests, regardless of their innocence. Further violating the civil rights of these individuals makes a mockery of due process and presumed innocence.”