



October 31, 2018

We Need to Improve Conditions at Cook County Jail

I have heard complaints by detainees at Cook County Jail that they are being subjected to violence while in detention, living in infested quarters, eating bad food, and are forced to use unsanitary toilet facilities. In response to these serious concerns, this week I held a press conference at 26th and California to highlight these issues. More than a dozen previous detainees, community activists, and leaders of organizations helping those who have been involved with the criminal justice system joined me to meet with Sheriff Thomas Dart's team after the press conference to lay out our concerns so the distressful living conditions for jail detainees can be rectified.

If we don't reform Cook County Jail, the communities in the city of Chicago will continue to experience unnecessary violence. I'm told by family members of jail detainees that when people are subjected to unsafe and unsanitary conditions in jail, it causes them more mental distress. When they finally are released back into the community, they often come out more angry and violent than when they went in.

Many Cook County Jail inmates awaiting trial have not been found guilty of a crime, but remain behind bars simply because they lack the financial means to pay bail. While in detention they may lose jobs, creating a financial hardship when they return home.

Cook County Jail, located on 96 acres, is the largest single site jail in the United States. Located at 2700 South California Avenue in Chicago, it is one of the largest single-site pre-detention facilities in the world, with an average daily population of around 9,000 inmates.

On any given day, up to a third of those incarcerated at Cook County Jail suffer from some form of mental illness, making the jail the largest mental health hospital in Illinois – and one of the largest in the country. The majority of the inmates are in jail for nonviolent offenses closely associated with their mental health. We also discussed with Sheriff Dart's staff how important it is for Cermak Health Services at Cook County Jail to continue a person's medication-assisted treatment with Suboxone while they are in jail so they don't experience withdrawal, and how Cermak could better collaborate with other facilities to provide on-going mental health and substance use disorder care when people are released from jail.

We will continue to meet with Sheriff Dart and his staff to find ways to improve conditions, so that those who come back home to their families and communities don't come back traumatized. We are scheduled to continue our push for change next week when we go inside the jail, visit inmates, and tour the facilities. The bottom line is how we can work together to stop the violence in our communities.

Sincerely,

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District