



July 17, 2020

The Honorable Board of Supervisors
Board-Supervisor/Clerk-Board
San Joaquin County
44 North San Joaquin Street, Sixth Floor
Suite 627
Stockton, CA 95202

Re: County Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, COVID CARES Act Funds, and Equity Issues

Dear Honorable Supervisors:

San Joaquin County together engages with our residents in honest, empathetic, respectful, and factually accurate conversations around multiple issue areas including racism, LGBTQ rights, gender equity, and social, economic and environmental justice reforms. We seek to empower residents to advocate for themselves regarding these issues with local government agencies.

We, and the coalition members listed at the close of this letter, are writing to express our deep concern with San Joaquin County's inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of transparency regarding COVID CARES Act spending, and equity issues that remain unaddressed year after year. Unfortunately, the stress placed on county residents by the pandemic has revealed that county administration is failing to serve the general public, exacerbating problems for San Joaquin County's most vulnerable residents. We feel that comments sent for each Board of Supervisors' meeting have failed to produce the type of systemic change that we need for area residents to survive the pandemic physically and financially. This letter is to serve notice that we will be mobilizing community response as part of a long-term strategy to make the Board of Supervisors and County Administrator responsive to the needs of the people.

Public Health Management Related to COVID-19

San Joaquin County has failed to manage itself. We were placed on Governor Newsom's watch list as our case numbers and hospitalizations have soared, even though we started with a much lower infection rate than surrounding counties in the spring. According to a July 15, 2020 article in *The Record*, "County public health officials are asking residents to follow the governor's orders and avoid social gatherings, as the virus spreads when an infected person speaks,

sneezes or coughs within six feet of others, even if the infected person isn't displaying any symptoms." This weak statement is the official public health response to the press on the same day a federal medical assistance team was deployed to Adventist Health Lodi Memorial Hospital to expand intensive care capacity for COVID-19 response.

COVID cases have almost doubled thus far in July, and county hospital intensive care units are operating at 121% of capacity as of the writing of this letter.

Volunteers with San Joaquin County Together have requested through public comments since March 2020 for San Joaquin County to do the following:

- 1) Pass and enforce a mask order;
- 2) Use COVID CARES Act dollars to broadly distribute PPE to community members in need;
- 3) Pass a resolution for the San Joaquin County Sheriff Department to distribute PPE as part of positive policing;
- 4) Provide PPE and physical barriers to protect San Joaquin County employees from COVID spread, in addition to flexible work schedules with allowance for working at home;
- 5) Educate first, and fine second, businesses failing to comply with mask orders;
- 6) Implement a large-scale public education program in multiple languages on the importance of mask wearing.

San Joaquin County response to these suggestions has been tardy to non-existent. It has failed to listen to community advocates, who are the eyes and ears of the community, and speak for community needs when everyday residents cannot do so for themselves. Now we find ourselves in a crisis situation resulting when deaths could have been prevented, and questionable long-term public health outcomes for area residents will not be understood for years.

San Joaquin County has also failed to protect its own employees at San Joaquin General Hospital. Also reported on July 15, 2020 by *The Record*, medical workers were moved into a shared workspace with probable COVID-19 patients without adequate ventilation and garbage bags taped up as room dividers.

We have sat through meetings and heard statements from various supervisors about why we had to "reopen" the County quickly. We have watched these same supervisors and the District Attorney place pressure on the Public Health Director to reopen the businesses of their political campaign patrons. We are in possession of an email sent by their Director of Emergency Services, Shellie Lima, to the City of Stockton, telling them "to stay in their lane" over consideration of a mask order in June. In that email, she misinterprets the June state order that said individuals should wear masks and that counties should enforce the order. Moreover, she used her official San Joaquin County email account, yet signed the email as a Stockton citizen. Her conduct was unbecoming of a County Director. Her spreading of misinformation and twisting best known practices regarding health orders during a pandemic was dangerous.

If we must close down again due to continued and accelerated virus spread, the resulting economic loss will be the direct result of the Board of Supervisors and County Administrators, the District Attorney, and the County Sheriff to prioritize pandemic control as the first step for economic recovery. We will ensure that San Joaquin County residents understand how the County has failed in its duty should this occur. We also want to remind the Board of Supervisors that COVID-19 continues to disproportionately strike people of color, the homeless, and the

poor harder than middle class white residents in terms of health and economic outcomes. Consequently, we see the lack of virus containment directives by officials and enforcement as an extension of implicit racial bias that permeates other areas in San Joaquin County governance, and a lack of care for communities of color.

COVID CARES Act Funding

We have made repeated public comments to the Board of Supervisors regarding how COVID CARES Act funding should be spent in accordance with the federal legislation that provided the funding. Congressman Jerry McNerney has also written to the Board of Supervisors questioning decision making by this body regarding spending decisions. In addition to once again dissecting what is wrong with San Joaquin County's lack of a full spending plan, we also believe the Board should understand how other counties have used their funding, rather than relying solely on the on what has been put forth by the County Administrator.

First and foremost, CARES Act funds can be spent on most things that can be deployed immediately (at least by December 30, 2020) to address the pandemic. CARES Act dollars could be spent on health-related expenses, testing, quarantine facilities or support, rental assistance, food delivery for homebound seniors, masks, handwashing stations, distance learning support related to COVID school closures, business grants for small businesses, and much more.

Sacramento County which received \$182 million dollars from the CARES Act funded Sierra Health Foundation \$440,000 for contract tracing. San Joaquin County continues to look for volunteer tracers, while our pandemic numbers explode, and unemployment once again increases with additional business closures. Contract tracing jobs are entry level, but also are a great workforce development opportunity that would build greater equity in our workforce.

Sacramento County spent \$3.4 million for twice daily restaurant meal deliveries to seniors. San Joaquin County falsely believes that Meals on Wheels suffices for full nutrition for our seniors. This federal program has experienced cuts that impact service and food quality. The program is constantly looking for volunteers to help seniors who cannot heat up their own meals. Fresh and nutritious ready to eat meals delivered to our most vulnerable residents, not only could bolster their overall health and emotional well-being, but such a program would enable restaurants to reemploy workers who have been laid off from their restaurant jobs. The Board of Supervisors and County Administrator, however, did not choose to fund what is best for the public good, claiming that keeping the money in reserves, which it was not intended to be used for, was the prudent thing to do.

Alameda County accepted \$292 million in funding. Their Board of Supervisors did allocate \$40 million to cover current expenditures, and delegated authority to the County Administrator "to move appropriations in the CARES Act special revenue fund between departments and expenditure accounts." However, the Alameda Board of Supervisors also allocated the following to be partly or wholly covered by CARES Act dollars: \$20 million for COVID testing, labs, and community education; \$3 million for patient services and transport; \$24.5 million to lease hotels (600 plus rooms) for quarantine purposes; \$2.1 million for homeless support services; and \$23 million to acquire three housing properties for COVID-19 response. While Alameda County clearly received a bigger allocation of funding proportionate to its population, it clearly took a balanced approach between fiscal discipline and providing for emergency public need during the pandemic. This balanced approach is the type of government decision making that the vast

majority of San Joaquin County residents would support; however, the Board of Supervisors has enabled our County Administrator to hoard funding while people suffer during a period of crisis.

Repeated attempts by the Board of Supervisors to shoehorn CARES Act dollars for a new homeless shelter that would be constructed after December 30, 2020 puts the County at risk because it could be forced into returning federal funding that must be spent by that date. This is the same scenario that unfolded between the County and the State in regard to the County failing to follow state mandated spending guidelines in regard to the Mental Health Services Act. The County's stuffing of state and federal dollars, that are mandated for specific spending programs, into reserve accounts to collect interest or fund other programs, reflects an ideology that government spending on the people is unnecessary. It is exactly this philosophy that permeates the thinking of several County Supervisors and the County Administrator and that has led to fewer services and inadequate infrastructure being developed throughout San Joaquin County compared to other counties in other parts of the state. It is an out of touch view of government administration that can be found in the revolving door of county administrators who move from county to county for better positions within the San Joaquin Valley. It does not serve a growing urban population in San Joaquin County. Moreover, this practice is another display of institutional implicit bias and discrimination because it defunds programs and infrastructure that would benefit communities of color, the homeless, and economically disadvantaged residents throughout the area.

Our last item of note regarding CARES Act dollars is that only \$1 million has been distributed to small businesses from a \$15 million fund, according to what was reported at the July 7, 2020 Board of Supervisors meeting. We were surprised when we heard from one or two business chambers that they felt the small business grant program was working. From our perspective, when we see how quickly businesses applied for similar funding through the City of Stockton, we believe that chamber businesses within their inner circles are content, while many more mom and pop businesses either do not know how to apply for funding, or understand what funding is available to them. We believe the need is the greatest among small businesses owned by people of color.

Advertising to a few select business chambers is not a broad enough outreach program to the community about how businesses can avail themselves of COVID CARES Act dollars. This program should be easy to identify and apply for on the County website, or the County should create a COVID response website similar to Stockton Strong. In addition, now that some businesses are being forced to close once again, due in part to County mismanagement of public health enforcement during reopening, we believe that San Joaquin County has an obligation to do broad outreach for grant availability to small local businesses, and specifically minority-owned businesses and self-employed individuals.

Mental Health Services Act Funding and Issues of Equity

Our community is struggling with mental health challenges more than ever. To make matters worse, the impacts of COVID-19 on our youth, as they struggle with adapting to the "new normal," has made coping and emotional wellness even more difficult to realize as access to counseling services is harder to acquire with physical school and program closures. Anxiety, trauma, despair, and depression are rampant within our communities.

This county has struggled with providing equity and equality for this community. **Equity in mental health means that** everyone in the community has the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to achieve and maintain good **health** and wellbeing. It is also about having the right

services provided in the right ways and in the right places to support **health** and wellbeing. The premise of Mental Health Services Act is so that communities of color and marginalized communities have the ability to access cultural and sub-cultural component services. Millions of MHSA dollars are currently sitting in the general fund, untouched and unused. In the wake of youth organizing and demanding mental health services, social services, and trauma informed care, why does the County continue to turn a blind eye to the needs of our community in this area?

The message was sent loud and clear by our youth through protests and public comments, yet the County ignores these cries and demand for trauma related services and care. This is yet another example of implicit racial bias in San Joaquin County governance. We expect the County to release the MHSA funding to a variety of community-based organizations that have a record of serving communities of color and to follow the intervention/prevention guidelines mandated in the Mental Health Services Act.

Sincerely yours,



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