

Open Letter to Allegheny County Jail Warden Orlando L. Harper, County Manager William McKain, and County Executive Rich Fitzgerald

Offer Life-saving Medications for Opioid Use Disorder in the Allegheny County Jail

May 7th, 2021

We are a diverse group of medical and public health professionals, community members, and, most importantly, individuals and family members who have lived through incarceration at Allegheny County Jail (ACJ).

In the past 5 years, nearly 3,000 people have died of an overdose in Allegheny County. By the County's own reporting, about 1 in 5 of these deaths was among people who had been released from jail in the past year, many within weeks of their release.

For years, we have worked tirelessly and supportively with the jail, its staff and county officials to encourage the use of buprenorphine (commonly known as Suboxone®), the standard of care for opioid use disorders (OUD), to be offered to inmates who may benefit. This is an evidence-based treatment that has been shown to reduce overdose risk and criminal behavior. After five years of planning, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising fatal overdoses, we were moved to write this open letter to publicly state the dire need for this treatment option.

We call on our public officials to demand that life-saving medications like buprenorphine be provided to inmates in the jail immediately to treat OUD and reduce overdose deaths.

Many national corrections groups advocate for making medications for opioid use disorder, like buprenorphine, available to people who are incarcerated including The National Sheriff's Association and The National Commission on Correctional Health Care.

Several other county jails around the Commonwealth including Franklin, Bucks, Montgomery have recently been funded by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to offer buprenorphine to inmates and others, such as Philadelphia, have been doing this independently. ACJ has failed to use these funding opportunities or do this independently.

Other County and affiliated agencies have advocated for the use of medications to treat OUD. The Allegheny County Department of Human Services, the Allegheny County Health Department, Community Care Behavioral Health and Allegheny HealthChoices, Inc., issued a joint position statement promoting medication-assisted treatment in January of 2017, more than four years ago.

Yet, ACJ still fails to offer this to the approximately 500 inmates who were being treated, also paid through the county, with either methadone or buprenorphine before they were booked in the jail. It would be illegal and unethical to deny someone their diabetes or heart medication

when entering the jail, yet this is routinely done for people with OUD who are at the greatest risk of dying from overdose in the community following their release. In fact, there are active lawsuits around the country against jails that fail to offer people the opportunity to continue their medical treatment for OUD.

For years, we have been told that the adoption of buprenorphine to treat inmates with OUD is imminent. We can no longer afford to wait. With Allegheny Health Network as the medical provider in the jail, it would only need to be requested by the County to deliver this high quality and effective treatment that it is quite capable of delivering and will be doing so in its newly launched post-incarceration clinic.

As tax-paying citizens, voters and professionals, we call on Allegheny County Jail Warden Orlando L. Harper, County Manager William McCain, and County Executive Rich Fitzgerald to make buprenorphine availability in the jail a priority issue and to begin this immediately.

Signed:

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