

Dear Friends,

Re: A Call to Action on current conditions in Fresno County Jails

On April 28, 2019, the Fresno Bee published a front page article about the Fresno County Jail system. It has the highest number of deaths of any California county jail system and some of the worst conditions in the state. Eleven inmates died in 2018 from untreated drug and alcohol withdrawal, suicide, medical negligence and murder. Thirteen other people were beaten and hospitalized. Forty-seven deaths have occurred in the last seven years. Two thirds of the people kept in the jail are awaiting trial, accused but not convicted. Many of them are non-violent offenders and many are arrested by the police and sheriffs for petty misdemeanor offenses. [The city of Fresno has the highest number of arrests for these offenses in California]. These inhumane conditions and serious overcrowding persist in spite of a federal consent decree issued in 2015 requiring the County to improve conditions.

Four years after the court order, experts say apathy among the officials in charge has created a crisis. Don Spector, director of the Prison Law Office, said “sheriffs have been very indifferent to jail conditions.” He said that there has been a “complete lack of action”. According to the Fresno Bee, Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims has repeatedly characterized such deaths as the unfortunate consequence of jail life and expresses no remorse whatsoever. She also said one of the most “painful” moments of her time in office was releasing inmates during the economic downturn. “Being a peace officer,” Mims said, “you know, you want to keep people locked up.” Mims is under a court order to immediately release inmates when overcrowding occurs.

The consent decree of 2015 requires Sheriff Mims to hire additional staff to protect and provide services to inmates, ease overcrowding, and to provide adequate health care. Since the 2015 decree, lawyers and prison reform experts have had regular meetings with the Fresno County Sheriff’s Department to examine their progress in correcting the conditions in the jail. Mims does not attend these meetings and sends her jail administrators instead. There is no accountability for the Sheriffs Department and the Board of Supervisors for their lack of regard for human life and a court order

It is up to us to demand human rights and humane treatment for inmates. It is up to us to demand the Board allocates funds and fixes the deplorable conditions in the jail. It is up to us to hold Sheriff Mims and the Board of Supervisors accountable. We seek your experience, knowledge, and support in an effort to build a broad-based coalition to work together for human rights and humane conditions in the Fresno County Jail System. We look forward to your support.

In Solidarity,
Inmate and Prisoner Rights Committee, DSA Fresno
(CONTACT INFO)

