



For economic and racial justice

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Public Comments of the Shriver Center on Poverty Law
Cook County Commission – Criminal Justice Committee
Proposed Resolution – Justice for Black Lives
July 27, 2020

Dear Commissioners:

I write today in strong support of File # 20-2867 – Proposed Resolution on Justice for Black Lives. I wish to thank Commissioner Johnson for his leadership in introducing this resolution, and Commissioners Aguilar, Anaya, Britton, Daley, Deer, Degnen, Lowry, Miller, Morrison, Silvestri, Sims, and Suffredin for their sponsorship.

The Shriver Center on Poverty Law (Shriver Center) fights for economic and racial justice. Today, we litigate, shape policy, and train and convene multi-state networks of lawyers, community leaders, and activists nationwide. Together, we are building a future where all people have equal dignity, respect, and power under the law.

We fight with and for marginalized people and communities by advocating for policies and laws that direct resources to communities and community based supports to keep people out of harmful carceral systems. In doing so, the Shriver Center recognizes that Cook County must no longer prioritize racist carceral systems and should instead reaffirm its commitment to BIPOC communities. We stand in solidarity with communities and our partners in demanding a substantial decrease in the Cook County Jail budget for FY 2021.

The Justice for Black Lives Resolution is the first step in the process of achieving these goals through the Cook County budget, and I therefore urge its passage in committee today and at the full Board of Commissioners meeting on July 30. The issues addressed in this resolution are of paramount importance – the Commission must support Black lives by supporting programs and resources that support Black families and communities.

As the Commission begins its consideration of the budget this summer and fall, I urge you to consider what has brought us to this point – a history of racist and violent policing, de facto segregation and mass incarceration and criminalization of Black people. Since the founding of our country, police have been a tool of white supremacy, used to preserve slavery, and repress people and movements in support of civil and human rights. On March 13 of this year, Louisville police murdered Breonna Taylor, and on May 25th of this year police murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis. Here in Chicago, in 2014, police shot and killed Laquan McDonald

in cold blood, as video captured him walking away from them. And these are only some of the well-publicized incidents of police violence against Black people – not to mention the other incidents that take place on a daily basis, so commonplace that they go unreported in the media.

The Commission cannot un-do these acts. However, you do have the ability to choose another path that will minimize the harm going forward. It is a path of divestment from systems that harm Black people and investment in systems that support Black families. It is a path that will support lives not end them. And it is a path you must take.

Divestment from the Cook County jail is the place to start this important work. Cash bond must end and must not be replaced with other tools of incarceration – like the electronic monitoring program currently operated by the Cook County Sheriff's Department. Electronic monitoring is not an alternative to incarceration, but instead another expensive form of incarceration that turns our communities into open air jails. Pre-trial incarceration preys on poor people and their families and is one of the largest failed policies in not only our state and county, but our country. While Cook County has made tremendous progress over the years to reduce its reliance on cash bond and decrease the jail population, the County has more work to do. The jail population has declined by 50 percent between 2013 and 2020, but yet the jail budget has been increased by 26 percent over the same period of time. We cannot accept this dichotomy.

Instead of funding the jail at this level, the County must deliver more services directly, while also supporting community based efforts. The Shriver Center and our partners will offer more specific solutions as the FY 2021 budget process moves forward. But for now I will highlight some of the key areas worthy of increased public investment outside of the Sheriffs department:

- Affordable housing to support the 50% of County renters who pay too high a percentage of their income in rent.
 - The County is in a unique position to build new housing through the Housing Authority of Cook County and the Land Bank.
 - The County should continue to focus on overtaxing and underfunding of Black homeowners. The County has recently been a leader in bringing affirmative litigation and active assessment strategies to bear on this issue.
 - The County must address the permanent punishments created by justice systems involvement by reducing barriers and creating new housing specifically for returning citizens and their families.
- Affordable, comprehensive and culturally appropriate health care, as we live through a pandemic where Black people make up 25 percent of the County's population, but half of the County's deaths from COVID-19.

- Mental health services so that we can provide community-based treatment, and ensure that trained professionals, not police, respond to mental health calls.
- Job creation, so that whether in the public or private sector, Cook County residents are paid a living wage and can support themselves and their families.

Change is always challenging, but there could be no more important moment to seek out this challenge and overcome it. I thank you again for supporting this resolution, and the Shriver Center looks forward to working with you in the coming months. You may reach me by email at jeremyrosen@povertylaw.org or by cell phone at (703) 887-6200.

Sincerely,

Jeremy N. Rosen

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Director of Economic Justice