July 06, 2020

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor of California
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

Mr. Clark Kelso
Receiver
California Correctional Health Care Services
P.O. Box 588500
Elk Grove, CA 95758

Sent via e-mail

RE: COVID-19 Infection Crisis at San Quentin State Prison

Dear Governor Newsom and Receiver Kelso:

The California Medical Association, which represents nearly 50,000 physicians, writes to request the immediate convening of an advisory group that includes individuals with infectious disease expertise, individuals with expertise in correctional administration, and the appropriate representatives from the impacted bargaining units, especially those that provide medical care within the facilities, to address the COVID-19 outbreak at San Quentin State Prison and proactively work to prevent similar outbreaks at other state prisons.

As of June 26, San Quentin had 545 active cases. Today, there are 1,381 cases. Nine hundred twenty are new in the last 14 days. There is an urgent imperative to act.

We recognize that there are unique considerations for this population that complicate questions concerning their health care. We also acknowledge the work that has been done to date to avoid an outbreak within the State's correctional facilities, including the expedited release of 3,500 qualifying inmates, transferring inmates to different facilities with unoccupied buildings or space available to increase physical distancing, and modifying delivery of health care for non-emergent issues. We are encouraged that there are additional new mitigation strategies under consideration.

Incarcerated individuals and the staff who serve in these facilities deserve protections against exposure and appropriate care when diagnosed with COVID-19. Failure to address exposure among the prison population has broad implications for incarcerated individuals, CDCR employees and the surrounding communities. Outbreaks within the incarcerated population can require care in community facilities that will impact workflows and patient cohorting to
meet the security considerations for these patients. The overrepresentation of Black and Latino individuals due to systemic racism within the criminal justice system means failure to address COVID-19 exposure will likely further exacerbate the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on these communities. Finally, we have significant concerns about the potential of widespread outbreaks, like the one at San Quentin, in other state prisons that are situated in communities with more limited health care infrastructure.

CMA stands ready to identify infectious disease experts who could participate in such an advisory group to triage the situation at San Quentin and help develop proactive protocols for other facilities. If you have questions or would like to discuss further, please contact Alecia Sanchez at asanchez@cmadocs.org or 916.551.2878.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Peter N. Bretan, Jr., M.D.
President