April 23, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio  
Mayor, City of New York  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Dermot Shea  
Commissioner, New York City Police Department  
1 Police Plaza  
New York, NY 10038

Re: Public Health Concerns on NYPD Spread of the COVID-19 Virus

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Shea,

We are 200 medical workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic, including doctors, nurses, physician’s assistants, and other medical workers, and organizations representing medical workers. We write to share our concerns with the way the New York City Police Department (NYPD) is policing during the current public health crisis. Specifically, we are alarmed at the high rate of infection among NYPD officers and fear that unnecessary interactions between the NYPD and the public will further exacerbate the public health crisis unfolding in New York City and rapidly spreading across the country.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to emphasize the importance of social distancing to reduce transmissions.\(^1\) Further, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), a leading police research and policy organization, recommends “identifying core department functions” and appropriately curtailing non-essential police activities such as “crime prevention programs, parking enforcement, and enforcement of certain misdemeanor laws” during pandemic situations.\(^2\) **We urge the NYPD to heed the CDC and PERF’s advice to socially distance and curtail all non-essential contacts between NYPD officers and the public at this time.**

We are especially concerned to hear that the NYPD is taking a business-as-usual approach to policing low-level offenses at this time.\(^3\) For each interaction the NYPD has with the public,


\(^2\) Andrea M. Luna, et al., *Police Planning for an Influenza Pandemic: Case Studies and Recommendations from the Field*, Critical Issues in Policing Series, Police Executive Research Forum 10 (Oct. 2007), [https://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Public_Health/police%20planning%20for%20an%20influenza%20pandemic%20case%20studies%20and%20recommendations%20from%20the%20field%202007.pdf](https://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Public_Health/police%20planning%20for%20an%20influenza%20pandemic%20case%20studies%20and%20recommendations%20from%20the%20field%202007.pdf).

there is a risk of virus transmission, and we urge the NYPD to take this public health risk seriously. **There is no question for us as medical providers that the risk of virus transmission is a far greater threat to the public health and safety of New Yorkers than non-violent offenses at this time.**

Unnecessary contact between the NYPD and the public at this time is even more concerning when taking the alarming rate of infection of the NYPD into account. Currently, the **NYPD infection rate is 121 infections per 1,000 NYPD officers, more than seven times that of New York City as a whole.**\(^4\) Because of the high infection rate, it is likely that many more NYPD officers have been exposed to the virus without their knowledge. Each interaction between NYPD officers and members of the public puts both groups at risk of transmitting the virus and further spreading in the community, in NYPD precincts across the city, and in the homes of NYPD officers and the people with whom they are in contact.

We urge you to reassess and readjust policing to meet the needs of the current moment, ensuring that you put the health and safety of New Yorkers first during this crisis:

1. **Halt the enforcement of low-level and ‘quality of life’ offenses to reduce unnecessary interactions between the NYPD and the public.** Social distancing is necessary in all sectors of society to reduce the risk of transmission and to “flatten the curve.” Just as medical facilities are switching to telemedicine and canceled elective procedures, we call on other sectors of society to reevaluate what level of in-person interaction is necessary, keeping in mind that every in-person interaction increases the risk of COVID-19 transmission. We believe that low-level, quality of life policing is simply not worth the risk to public health at this time.

2. **Cease unnecessary arrests by issuing summonses or appearance tickets for all other qualifying offenses, and stop the flow of people onto Rikers Island.**\(^5\) Every arrest creates dozens of points of contact and opportunities for virus transmission. These contacts include the contact between the person arrested and the arresting officers, contact between the person arrested and additional officers at the precinct and Central Booking, arrested people in close contact in cramped holding cells at precincts and Central Booking, court officers assisting with arraignments, and, in the case that bail is set on the individual, contact with Department of Corrections staff and others detained in NYC Jails. Each of these people go on to be in contact with others in their workplaces,

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\(^4\) See @NYPDnews, Twitter (April 19, 2020), https://twitter.com/NYPDnews/status/1251992638846390275 (Infection rate based on the 4,371 NYPD employees diagnosed with COVID-19 out of a police force of 36,000 employees).

\(^5\) See The Legal Aid Society, *COVID-19 Infection Tracking in NYC Jails*, https://legalaidnyc.org/covid-19-infection-tracking-in-nyc-jails/ (last visited March 31, 2020), for more information on the alarming rates of infection in NYC jails, where the current infection rate is more than 7.5 times that of New York City; see also Megan Flynn, *Top doctor at Rikers Island calls the jail a ‘public health disaster unfolding before our eyes’*, Wash. Post (March 31, 2020 7:00 AM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/31/rikers-island-coronavirus-spread/.
families, and, in the case of those detained, in NYC jails. Each arrest risks virus transmission, and we implore you to take this risk seriously and require officers to issue summonses for all qualifying offenses.

(3) **Encourage social distancing through public service announcements, not enforcement that leads to unnecessary contacts and risks further transmission of the coronavirus.** By sending NYPD officers—who currently have a much higher rate of coronavirus infection than NYC as a whole)—into communities to enforce social distancing, the NYPD is likely exacerbating, not helping, the problem of rapid viral transmission. Close contact, as required when issuing a citation, should be avoided whenever possible.

As medical workers on the frontlines of the crisis, we urge you to prioritize the health and safety of New Yorkers and to take seriously the need for social distancing and avoiding unnecessary contacts between all people, including interactions between the NYPD and the public.

Sincerely,

Advancing Health Equity

Callen-Lorde Community Health Center

Nurses for Social Justice

NYC Coalition to Dismantle Racism in the Health System

Physicians for a National Health Program-NY Metro

Planned Parenthood of Greater New York

Progressive Doctors

Treatment Action Group (TAG)

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City Councilmember Rivera, Chair of Hospitals Committee
City Councilmember Levin, Chair of General Welfare Committee
NYPD Inspector General Phil Eure
NYC Public Advocate Jumaane Williams