Care First Funding For California Counties

California counties are struggling to provide essential health and human services as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to surge. The 2021-2022 state budget should prioritize the health of local municipalities by funding alternatives to incarceration and community-based services informed by public health frameworks. Community-based alternatives to incarceration include: permanent supportive housing, transitional housing, substance use treatment, mental health treatment and youth development programs.

This cost-saving shift of fiscal priorities will provide immediate relief to counties and establish the long-term infrastructure they need to address the root causes of incarceration. The implementation of a statewide “Care First” budget roadmap, modeled after Los Angeles County, will help the state bridge the gaps of lost revenue in the coming years. Most importantly, a reprioritization of state investments into health and wellness will undoubtedly save the lives of countless people inside and outside of jail facilities. California has a historic opportunity to enact a Care First Budget for California that reflects our progressive values.

To that end, the State Legislature should adopt the following budget priorities:

1. Increase and earmark CARES Act funding to support jail population reduction: Reducing jail populations is a public health strategy to stem the spread of COVID-19. Increased State funding for alternatives to incarceration will support already existing efforts in counties like Los Angeles, San Francisco and Santa Clara, and incentivize other counties to model similar efforts.

2. Amend AB 109 to prioritize Care: AB 109 funding was intended for alternatives to incarceration, but has not been able to fulfill its purpose of reducing recidivism and jail populations because the funding has not reached community organizations who have demonstrated significant impacts on reentry needs. The majority of AB 109 funding across the state is allocated to Sheriffs Departments and Probation Offices. Their mismanagement of these funds has resulted in audits by both local and State leadership. By amending AB 109 to direct counties to fund community-based capacity building and to distribute funding to CBO’s through health departments or another reliable, community trusted agency, the State will fulfill the intent of this legislation.

3. Reclassify AB 900 for Care First capital projects: Los Angeles County has $100 million in unspent AB 900 funds previously earmarked for the construction of a new women’s jail. The County has since cancelled that project and shifted towards building housing and supportive services. Jail construction and refurbishment dollars, like AB 900, should be allocated towards capital projects that meet COVID-19 related needs - such as transitional and permanent housing for system-involved individuals. In order to use AB 900 funds to meet the immediate and urgent needs of counties, the State should amendment the bill to allow the funds to be reclassified for capital projects that support alternatives to incarceration.

4. Fund A Just Transition: A just transition is a set of principles, processes, and practices to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. As California creates a green economy to transition from fossil fuels to green jobs that support the health, wellness and sustainability of everyone, we have a blueprint to transition from a punitive economy to a Care First economy. Tens of thousands of individuals rely on an income generated from local carceral systems in California. Understanding that employment is life saving, and believing that workers deserve to be employed in positions that care for and restore communities, the State should fund county efforts to transition these individuals into employment that address gaps in health and human services, as well as growing emergency response needs due to climate change and COVID-19. By funding counties to implement a “just transition”, California will be protecting its workforce and addressing the intersecting crises of mass incarceration, climate change, COVID-19 and racial inequality.