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As St. Louis City Finalizes the Budget, Population in Workhouse Jail Drops to Record Low, and Majority of St. Louis Board of Aldermen Support Permanently Closing the Workhouse

In a historic moment, St. Louis City has a clear path to permanently shutter its Medium Security Institution, commonly known as the Workhouse. For decades, the Workhouse has reinforced an anti-Black status quo in St. Louis that is reflected in the City's policing, courts, and unlawful money bail system. Since early 2018, a local jail closure campaign, Close the Workhouse (CtW), has raised widespread awareness and garnered political support to permanently shutter the notoriously inhumane and hellish jail, and ensure another is not built in its place. In January 2020, coinciding with the release of the campaign's second 'Plan to Close the Workhouse', City alderpersons introduced a resolution to defund and close the jail. As the City moves to finalize the Fiscal Year 2021 budget and the Workhouse population is at an all time low (under 100 people), CtW announces majority support from the Board of Aldermen (BoA) to defund and finally close the Workhouse.

The extensive endorsement is a result of several factors, namely the Close the Workhouse campaign's city-wide outreach, organizing, and public education efforts, which have brought this issue to the forefront of conversation and prompted residents to contact their elected officials. Over the past two years, and particularly in 2020, despite challenges presented by COVID-19, CtW has activated a broad coalition of individuals and organizations calling for the permanent closure of this jail.

The following 14 St. Louis City alderpersons support permanently closing the Workhouse in FY 2021: Brandon Bosley (Ward 3), Christine Ingrassia (Ward 6), Annie Rice (Ward 8), Dan Guenther (Ward 9), Sarah Martin (Ward 11), Megan Green (Ward 15), Jesse Todd (Ward 18), Cara Spencer (Ward 20), John Collins-Muhammad (Ward 21), Brett Narayan (Ward 24), Shane Cohn (Ward 25), Shameem Clark-Hubbard (Ward 26), Pam Boyd (Ward 27), and Heather Navarro (Ward 28). These alderpersons represent wards throughout St. Louis, including North City, South City, and the central corridor.

Among the remaining alderpersons, most have yet to publicly take a position on the question of defunding and closing the Workhouse in the next fiscal year. Included in this group is BoA President Lewis Reed.

Previous support for closing the Workhouse has come from Comptroller Darlene Green, Treasurer Tishaura Jones, and Circuit Attorney Kimberly Gardner, as well as her opponent for Circuit Attorney, Mary Pat Carl. In a January 2020 interview on St. Louis Public Radio, Mayor Lyda Krewson stated, “We need money for a lot of things and any money that we can save by having a more limited operation at MSI or by repurposing MSI into something else is money that we can spend on other things that we definitely need.”

When host Sarah Fenske asked whether the Mayor would like to get the City down to one jail facility, Krewson responded, “Of course.” She noted that there were, at the time, 232 people at the Workhouse. Today, there are 96.

While the Coronavirus pandemic has forced cities like St. Louis to consider how future budget revenues and allocations will be impacted, local advocates and proponents of CtW have long encouraged public officials to re-imagine public safety by divesting from a failed ‘arrest and incarcerate’ model and by re-investing in resources that combat poverty and racism.

The recent killings of Black people by police and subsequent local and national uprisings have sparked an unprecedented conversation about defunding the police and investing in families and neighborhoods that have long been marginalized, criminalized and devastated by failed racist institutions, including jails and prisons. In St. Louis, several organizations and stakeholders have circulated a “Five Point Plan For Our Future St. Louis” that suggests concrete policy changes such as closing the Workhouse, defunding the police, freeing political prisoners, disarming and decommissioning police, and making reparations in historically neglected communities.

“This is a historic moment,” said Blake Strode, Executive Director of ArchCity Defenders. “A majority of the representatives elected to the legislative body in the City of St. Louis are making clear that it is time to turn the page on the Workhouse for good. We are at a crossroads, and the people of this city are demanding that we end our reliance on failed systems and begin investing deeply in our communities.”

The Close the Workhouse campaign consists of people impacted by the Workhouse, and is anchored by Action St. Louis, the Bail Project St. Louis, and ArchCity Defenders. In the past two years, CtW has developed widespread support, including from national partners like the Advancement Project National Office and Ben and Jerry’s.

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Follow the Close the Workhouse campaign on social media, and keep up with the conversation using #CloseTheWorkhouse.