March 14, 2020

Governor Mike DeWine
Director Amy Acton
Director Lori Criss

Dear Gov. DeWine, Director Acton and Director Criss,

We applaud your swift action and decisive leadership to limit the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic in our state. I am writing to alert you to urgent issues facing Ohio’s homeless population and request immediate and specific interventions to assist local public health agencies and homeless services providers respond to local outbreaks among the homeless population.

People experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of exposure and may be more vulnerable to the effects of the virus simply due to their homelessness. People experiencing homelessness involve many different vulnerable groups such as homeless families with children and those with high rates of chronic disease and others with the full range of behavioral health issues that make them an extremely vulnerable population. Social distancing is not possible if you are homeless and dependent on emergency shelters or other congregate settings for meals and other basic needs. The basic medical advice to stay home if you’re feeling ill simply doesn’t apply to people who lack a home. Frequent handwashing and other basic hygiene practices require ready access to running water and other supplies.

We use a range of interventions to address the needs of homeless people. In particular, emergency shelters and related homeless facilities present unique and significant concerns in light of the current crisis. Ohio has up to 300 emergency shelters and similar programs with nearly 10,000 beds operating in nearly every county in the state. These projects operate in congregate settings, run by non-profits with quite limited means and very limited ability to effectively implement much of the coronavirus guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Ohio Department of Health and other agencies. Many facilities lack any space necessary to isolate and quarantine clients who show symptoms of COVID-19. Many agencies report that they can no longer obtain essential cleaning supplies. Many homeless programs have not developed any kind of coordinated response to these particular issues with their local health departments.

In response to these pressing concerns, we request the Ohio Department of Health:

- Provide targeted briefings for public health departments and homeless assistance providers about incidence of COVID-19, emerging strategies to implement ODH, CDC, and HUD guidance, and respond to questions about implementing local plans to respond to COVID-19. ODH should adapt protocols from other states and localities1;

- Develop training that can be delivered by local health departments to prevent and respond to COVID-19.

1 See https://nhchc.org/clinical-practice/diseases-and-conditions/influenza/
Secondly, we request **ODH issue an order that directs local health departments** to:

- Establish immediate contact with management staff at all emergency shelters and the homeless continuum of care leadership within their jurisdiction to develop collaborative COVID-19 preparedness plans that identify additional space that can be used to accommodate social distancing or isolation protocols. These could include a wide range of options, from community centers, faith facilities, vacant stores, sprung structures, motels, and other appropriate sites. These sites will need the necessary staffing, equipment, supplies, and services to provide necessary care; the costs of additional sites should be covered by the Ohio Department of Health and/or local health departments. The costs of this response cannot be covered by existing homeless assistance funding. Health districts should be empowered to waive policies, regulations, and restrictions on use of funding to make such quick action possible;

- Provide training for homeless services agency staff on hygiene and safety protocols, referral processes for getting individuals into isolation or quarantine, how to connect with healthcare facilities appropriately and other services;

- Provide all emergency shelters and homeless service providers with the necessary sanitizers, protective gear, hygiene disinfectant supplies and other needed materials and supplies;

- Make all needed supplies, necessary testing, treatment, isolation/quarantine locations available to the programs and residents available at no costs.

In addition, we urge the **Administration to take immediate steps to reduce and prevent more homelessness** as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Many complicating factors, such as reduced working hours, social distancing policies, and children being out of school, will force parents to miss work, increasing the likelihood of eviction for many low-income households. Furthermore, people who become ill with COVID-19 will be unable to report to work and do not have adequate paid leave. Without resources to offset the loss of income, Ohio can expect that more people will be seeking emergency shelter which will increase the exposure of COVID-19, thereby undercutting all of our containment efforts.

In order to prevent more Ohioans falling into homelessness, thereby increasing their vulnerability to infection and further spreading the virus, we request the Administration:

- Allocate funding to emergency rental assistance and eviction prevention services for households affected by the consequences of COVID-19;

- Institute a 60-day pause on evictions due to non-payment of rent or related issues to enable households to stay home and comply with social distancing and quarantine practices;

- Support homeless services providers’ efforts to help Ohioans living in shelters to find appropriate permanent housing as quickly as possible to reduce shelter occupancy and support social distancing and isolation protocols. We have previously suggested strategies to accomplish this goal quickly by expanding efforts to provide Rapid Rehousing and homeless prevention services.

Finally, we recommend the Administration request and **advocate for emergency federal assistance** to address the needs of homeless Ohioans during the coronavirus outbreak and the immediate aftermath. Specific requests should include additional:
• HUD Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) awards to state and local governments for homeless prevention assistance, temporary shelter expansion, additional staff capacity to allow shelters to remain open during daytime hours, and rental assistance to speed exits from homelessness;

• Funding awards to HUD’s Homelessness Continuum of Care program to fund homeless prevention assistance and assistance to cover rental assistance to exit homelessness through Ohio’s regional CoCs;

• USDA summer meals funding for family shelters and other family services to support the costs of providing meals to children who will not be able to access school breakfasts and lunches. Support additional USDA program expansions that will increase food security for homeless people, including SNAP, WIC, etc.

• FEMA EFSP (Emergency Food and Shelter Program) funding available to local communities to provide food, shelter, and homeless prevention assistance. These funds are distributed through local nonprofit networks that can quickly ramp up and provide emergency relief. Streamline the awards and administration process to speed up availability to families, seniors, and individuals.

We believe these actions are necessary to contain the spread of the coronavirus not only within Ohio’s homeless population, but to mitigate the impact on the broader public as well. Please know that COHHIO stands ready to assist the Administration to implement these requests in any way possible and to provide ongoing guidance during the period of crisis. Thank you for your leadership and for your prompt attention to these issues.

Sincerely,

Bill Faith
Executive Director