



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
February 8, 2023

Contact: Krishnaveni Gundu
krish.gundu@texasjailproject.org
(281)-854-4104 (Cell)
Karen Muñoz
Hays County Jail Advocates
(512) 375-0891

Coalition of Advocates and Victims of Jail Conditions Call For Redirection of State Taxpayer Funds away from Mass Incarceration and Toward Public Health Investments

Heart-Wrenching Testimony from Family Members Expose “Deadly Situation” in Jails Across Texas

(Austin, TX) Today, a coalition of community advocates and family members of victims called for an overhaul in how state and local authorities across Texas address public safety. During a meeting of the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (TCJS), experts from Texas Jail Project (TJP), Mano Amiga, and family members of victims testified to the increasingly dangerous and cruel conditions at county jails across Texas, characterizing the situation as “deadly” and an “emergency.” In response, they urged urgent action to shift resources away from failed punitive systems that criminalize already disenfranchised people, especially people with disabilities and toward proven systems of health care, including increased support for mental health treatment, education, and prevention instead.

Despite national decreases, Texas continues to see a surge in county jail population. This increase has coincided with surges in reported incidents of violence, medical neglect, abuse, and in-custody deaths. According to the Texas Commission on jail standards data, in 2022, 161 people reportedly died in Texas County Jails.

In Harris County alone, there have been 28 fatalities - all pretrial deaths that occurred after the implementation of SB 6 in 2021. Currently, 242 county jails are holding more than 72,000 people per day, over 67 per cent of whom are pretrial - *legally innocent*. At the same time, about 2,500 people who have been criminalized for their disabilities continue to wait in jails for over 700 days for access to a state psychiatric bed. The racist and wealth based cash bail system is largely to

blame for overcrowding and inhumane conditions in the jails. Lack of meaningful access to mental health care in the community is another reason for the disproportionate criminalization of people with disabilities.

*“The most common complaint we receive from jails is lack of timely medical care or wilful medical neglect. And many of these individuals are community members who did not receive the mental health care they needed in the community. **If people got the right care, at the right time, at the right place, our jails would not be the de facto warehouses of people with disabilities. We need robust investments in front end solutions that prevent the criminalization of our most vulnerable populations.**”* said Krish Gundu, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Texas Jail project. *“As a state, we’ve been in a public and mental health crisis for years now. SB 6 has poured gasoline on a burning house by further criminalizing vulnerable populations. **It’s clear that the only solution toward achieving true public safety is to shift our resources from mass incarceration to upstream solutions such as equitable and meaningful access to healthcare and stable housing.**”*

Family members and loved ones of people who have suffered from medical neglect, abuse and violence in jails, also testified about the alarming conditions.

Jacilet Lee, mother of Evan Lee who died in Harris county jail in March last year made an impassioned plea for transparency in her son’s homicide. *“It’s been 323 days since my son died. No one has given me any answers. He was a special needs person receiving care from the local mental health authority. Why was he arrested? Why was he transferred to Harris county jail? What happened to him? We know nothing. It’s torture.”* Evan was being held on a \$30,000 bond.

Deborah Smith, mother of Kristan Smith who also died in Harris county jail last March demanded accountability from the Jail Commission. Kristan’s cause of death, which was due to complications from a fungal infection, was not released until this year. *“My daughter was very good at managing her diabetes. She was in good health when she was needlessly arrested and held on cash bail. They killed her in that jail. If we had the money to buy her freedom, we could have saved her from this deadly jail. I blame the DA, the sheriff, the jail staff, the county commissioners, Harris Health, everyone is responsible for all the harm and deaths in Harris county jail. If they cannot keep our loved ones safe, they need to shut that jail down!”*

Amy Growcock shared her horrific experience giving birth in Harris county jail in August of last year. *“What I went through was surreal and terrifying. I hope no woman has to go through such a dehumanizing experience. ”*

In another particularly disturbing incident that occurred on December 12, 2022, Joshua Wright, who was in the custody of the Hays County Jail, was shot and killed by Hays County Sheriff’s Office Corrections Officer Isaiah Garcia. The shooting occurred during a visit to the hospital. Video footage of the shooting and the moments leading up to it have still not been released to Joshua’s family or the public, and it remains unclear what caused Officer Garcia to shoot

Joshua multiple times, or whether there was any justification for the use of deadly force. Despite reports made to multiple governmental bodies, including the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, about violence toward incarcerated people in the Hays County Jail, and about Officer Garcia in particular, these claims were dismissed as unfounded without any evidence given as to what type of investigation was done to reach that conclusion.

“We can no longer hide away our incarcerated brothers and sisters into the world of forgotten souls,” said Heart of Christ Fellowship Church Pastor Hillary Lockhart. ***“We should not find comfort in their invisible existence and avoid seeing their needs of basic survival not being met. In Matthews, Jesus said I was sick and in prison, and you did not visit me. We must come from behind the prison administrative offices but actually visit and touch the lives of the voiceless incarcerated to hear their grievances. Then we can restore and heal dispirited men, broken women, and reunite their families. Joshua Wright’s family is asking for answers concerning his death. We need to hear their cries and speedily respond.”***

“Hays County Jail won’t give me my medication correctly or give it to me at all and because of that I’ve ended up in the emergency room twice since October 2022,” said John Thomas who is currently incarcerated at the Hays County Jail.

Additional speakers who provided testimony included Elle Cross, Cyrus Gray III, Myles Martin, Randi Franks, Natalie Freeman, Adrian Wright, Angie Villescaz and Ashley Schwandt.

About Texas Jail Project and Mano Amiga

Texas Jail Project’s mission is to liberate communities by organizing with, and advocating for, people incarcerated in Texas county jails and their loved ones. For more information visit www.texasjailproject.org

Mano Amiga seeks a world where people of all color and creed are free to move without persecution, a world without fear of policing. We implement this in our work by promoting change from the ground-up through local advocacy, education, art, and community engagement. For more information visit www.manoamigasm.org