



ALABAMA APPLESEED CENTER for LAW & JUSTICE

March 30, 2020

Dr. Scott Harris, State Health Officer, Alabama Department of Public Health
Brian Hastings, Director, Alabama Emergency Management Agency
Delivered electronically

Dear Dr. Harris & Director Hastings,

The undersigned are Alabamians and organizations grateful for your steadfast leadership and coordination during these challenging times. In addition, we, along with hundreds of Alabamians,¹ are all dedicated to ensuring the health and well-being of members of Alabama's Black Belt and other rural counties during the COVID-19 crisis.

We recognize that the mission of the Alabama Department of Public Health is to "promote, protect, and improve Alabama's health";² which historically has included protecting the public's health through both disease prevention and "the assurance of public health service to resident and transient populations of the state regardless of social circumstances or the ability to pay."³ Similarly, we recognize that the role of the Alabama Emergency Management Agency is to "coordinate the emergency activities of all state departments and agencies" including "hazard mitigation, preparedness, [and] response" which includes "manag[ing] the flow of state/federal/private resources, services, and personnel" during a State of Emergency.⁴

We believe that these missions are strengthened, if Alabama creates testing sites within every Black Belt county and other rural areas throughout the state. We applaud you for the fact that as this pandemic has quickly developed and unfolded, so too has your responsiveness to the crisis and communities in need. However, as members and neighbors of the Black Belt community we are seeking assurance and information about additional efforts to do more in our Black Belt and rural communities.

¹ *Testing Sites in Rural areas in Alabama Petition*, Change.org, https://www.change.org/p/governor-kay-ivey-testing-sites-in-rural-areas-in-alabama?recruiter=1065382405&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=psf_combo_share_init ial&utm_term=share_petition&recruited_by_id=0d3f3d40-7034-11ea-b779-6fa39f1b534a&utm_content=fht-21117627-en-us%3Av10, (petition started by Darren Dubuse, Covington County native and signatory on this letter)

² Alabama Department of Public Health Strategic Plan 2019-2023, Ala. Dep't Public Health, Dec. 19, 2018, <https://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/about/assets/adph-strategic-plan-2019-2023.pdf>

³ State Health Officer Donald E. Williamson, *Revised Semi-Monthly Employee Handbook (Policy ID#2013-007)*, 3, Alabama Department of Public Health, <http://www.adph.org/IT/assets/770.pdf>, December 9, 2013.

⁴ *Our Mission*, Alabama Emergency Management Agency, <https://ema.alabama.gov/mission/>

It is our understanding that as of right now (the morning of Monday, March 30th) there are no COVID-19 testing sites set up in 10 of the 18 Black Belt counties.⁵ While we strongly appreciate State and other leaders' swiftness with creating testing sites in eight Black Belt Counties (Marengo, Pike, Hale, Dallas, Wilcox, Macon, Perry, and Montgomery); we urge you to develop and/or share with the public your plans to also develop testing sites in each of the following counties: Pickens, Greene, Sumter, Choctaw, Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw, Bullock, Russell, and Barbour.

Although the current number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Black Belt are relatively low, we are concerned about the likelihood of underreporting connected to the lack of testing in the area. We are also concerned about how the lack of testing sites available in Black Belt counties may exacerbate other medical⁶ and socioeconomic vulnerabilities of members of these communities, including people with disabilities. For example, we know that many Black Belt counties have much higher rates of poverty than other Alabama counties.⁷ Many Black Belt counties are also federally designated as medically underserved due to their shortage of primary care providers, high poverty, and high infant mortality.⁸ Similarly, we know that many Black Belt community-members face a number of other healthcare barriers including but not limited to only having one (if any) hospital in their county—oft times requiring a thirty-minute or longer drive to get to;⁹ lack of reliable transportation; lack of reliable phone and/or internet service—which can lead to a lack of access to information about care and resources; and a historical lack of trust or communication between the medical community and Black Belt patients.¹⁰ By not providing testing sites within every Black Belt county, each of these pre-existing barriers to care are likely to worsen.

Most alarmingly, a lack of access to tests within the Black Belt is certain to lead to not only a delay in COVID-19 detection within these areas, but also a delay and hindrance to both: (1) community members receiving timely and adequate care; and (2) community members and leaders being able to take proper steps to flatten the curve in these areas. Another unintentional consequence of not testing in these areas is the possible formation of an illusion that COVID-19 has not yet hit these areas as hard as it has hit others, and the definite unintentional spread of the virus by asymptomatic or untested community-members.

⁵ Alabama's COVID-19 Data and Surveillance Dashboard, Alabama Department of Public Health, <https://alpublichealth.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/6d2771faa9da4a2786a509d82c8cf0f7>, March 27, 2020, 9:52 a.m.; Jordyn Elston, *Macon County now offering coronavirus testing*, WTVM News, March 28, 2020, https://www.wtvm.com/2020/03/28/macon-county-now-offering-coronavirus-testing/?fbclid=IwAR18V6Xr7ibHXgZ6_czalnBOFUBA9HGH4ZyurpUPk1O0FTSEIDlhPn7pilU; also The Black Belt Community Foundation and the Rural Health Medical Program report that there are also testing sites in Dallas County (Main Street Family Urgent Care, in Selma), Wilcox County (JP Jones Hospital and Dr. Huey Kid, both in Camden), and Hale County (Hale County Hospital, in Greensboro); other community members have reported that there is also testing available in Perry County (Vaughan Regional Medical Center and Cahaba Medical Care, both in Marion, AL).

⁶ For example, Felecia Lucky (President of The Blackbelt Community Foundation (BBCF) and a signatory on this letter) states that "BBCF recently surveyed its Head Start families and found that 21% of our Head Start families report that they have a family member who is deemed high risk using the CDC definition."

⁷ *Alabama Poverty Data Sheet*, Alabama Possible, https://alabamapossible.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AP_PovertyFactSheet_2018_Web.pdf, 2018

⁸ Anna Clair Vollers, *Rural healthcare isn't easy. Here's how one Alabama woman bridges gaps in the Black Belt*. AL.com, January 14, 2020 (citing MUA Find, United States Health Resources & Services Administration, <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/mua-find>)

⁹ Hospital Directory, Alabama Hospital Association, <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/mua-find>

¹⁰ Anna Maria Berry-Jester, *The Health Care System Is Leaving The Southern Black Belt Behind*, FiveThirtyEight, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-health-care-system-is-leaving-the-southern-black-belt-behind/>, June 28, 2017

For the foregoing reasons, we urge the State of Alabama to immediately share with the public your plans for: (1) opening COVID-19 testing sites in every county within the Black Belt; and (2) making COVID-19 testing free and widely accessible to Black Belt residents and not contingent upon ability to pay.¹¹ We stand ready and willing to partner with you to increase community education or assist in other ways as needed. Please let us know how we can be of the most assistance.

We appreciate your consideration of our recommendations, comments, and concerns. We will plan to follow up with you via phone within the coming days. If there are other parties within your department that we should contact please let us know. Any correspondence can be directed to Akiesha Anderson, at (334) 544-9625 or akiesha.anderson@alabamaappleseed.org.

Respectfully submitted,

Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program (ADAP)
Alabama Arise
AIDS Alabama
Medical Advocacy and Outreach (MAO)
Faith in Action Alabama
Faith and Works
Sowing Seeds of Hope
SPLC Action Fund
Project Horseshoe Farm
Legal Services Alabama
Felecia L. Lucky, President of the Black Belt Community Foundation
Ainka Sanders Jackson, Executive Director of Selma Center for Nonviolence Truth and Reconciliation
The Honorable Jason Q. Ward, Mayor of Lisman, AL
The Honorable Adrian D. Johnson, Lowndes County District Court Judge
April Collins, Collins Law, LLC
Jacquelyn Grant Jones, Grant-Jones Legal LLC
Neena Speer, Neena R. Speer Law Firm LLC
Krystal Allen, Dallas County native, K. Allen Consulting, & The Rural Leadership Institute
Marsha Horton, Hale County native
Darren Dubose, Choctaw County native
Darlene McGaw, Bullock County resident
Jalaya Morrow, Montgomery County resident
Alexandria Battiste, former Montgomery County resident
Patrick Packer, Black Belt advocate
Iman Packer, Black Belt advocate

¹¹ See Janelle Griffith, *Teen whose death may be linked to coronavirus denied care for not having health insurance, mayor says*, NBC News, March 27, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/teen-whose-death-may-be-linked-coronavirus-denied-care-not-n1170616> (this article is being used to illustrate the fact that patients being turned away or denied care because of lack of insurance or inability to pay is a particular concern for us given the socioeconomic realities of many Black Belt residents).