

**Open Letter to Sheriff Mahoney
from the Young Gifted and Black Coalition**

To: Sheriff Mahoney
Dane County Jail
115 W. Doty St
Madison WI, 53704

From: Young Gifted and Black
fergusontomadison@gmail.com

Dear Sheriff Mahoney,

We are writing to you to explain our demands and what we would like to see you do to fulfill them.

1) The \$8 million proposed for jail planning and land acquisition should be taken off the table, and redirected to resources and initiatives led by the Black community.

While we understand that there are concerns related to people with mental health struggles in solitary confinement, and safety issues due to outdated equipment in the CCB, our solution to the problem is to release people so they can return to their families and communities. This would free up jail space so that people with mental health needs can be more appropriately housed, and allow you to stop using outdated and malfunctioning cells.

We understand you have come out saying that there will not be a “brand new” jail built. We would like to see a written moratorium on building a jail. However, we also do not want to see major remodelling efforts. Rather, we demand solutions that dramatically reduce the typical number of people in the jail as a first step, and then divert people from entering jail in the first place.

It is no new news that the incarceration rates in your jail are some of the worst in the country for black people. While this problem also involves the MPD, other police departments, judges, the DA, prosecutors, Clerk of Courts, public defenders, and those in our community with influence in areas such as education, employment, housing, and health, you and the Sheriff’s Office do have a large role to play. We also include the Public Protection and Judiciary, the Criminal Justice Council, the County Board, and the County Executive’s Office as decision makers in this process.

We demand that you to make a plan for how to release people so they can return to their families and communities, as well as lowering your deputies’ arrest rates in the communities that they patrol.

This includes measures such as:

- *Your part in lowering of bail and increasing signature bonds*
- *Supporting bail alternative and bail loan programs*
- *Increasing participation in community-release programs, such as home detention and electronic monitoring (including addressing income and racial disparities among people who participate caused by program eligibility rules)*

- *Supporting expanded pre-trial services*

In addition, we support releasing people with mental health needs to community-based support services outside of the jail. A community-based facility that serves both people under Sheriff's Office supervision as well as other community members might be a good fit. As we will address below, we demand an end to solitary confinement. With the additional space opened up from getting people out and keeping them out of jail, these needs can be met.

Making Black communities stronger, and having support for Black self determination is key to solving the issue of over incarceration. We want you use your voice to advocate for money such as this \$8 million to be directed to Black-led initiatives. While this \$8 million is allocated for capital expenses for planning a new jail and land acquisition, capital funding be used to build things for the Black community such as community centers or black owned businesses. We do not want to see Black women, children and queer led initiatives be left out of this, and we also want to see an increase in operating funding for Black-led initiatives. This may mean having a public referendum to raise the levy limit. You have a strong voice in advocating for the need for this type of funding.

2) The immediate release from jail of people incarcerated for crimes of poverty. Make a plan to return 350 Black people to their families and communities, and remove 350 jail beds.

Building off of our first demand, this demand gets deeper into getting people out and keeping people out of jail. One of our demands we have stated publicly is for the release of 350 Black people from jail and to keep this many out to be able to remove 350 beds from the jail. Additionally, 350 Black people every month must be prevented and/or diverted from entering the jail, as there are typically about 3,900 Black people that cycle through the jail every year. This would eliminate the need for 350 beds in the jail, and also eliminate the need for renovations due to safety concerns and mental health concerns. If there was no structural racism, the jails and the arrest rates should be proportional to the demographics of the population. In a jail of 800, without structural racism and a demographic of 5% Black population there should be closer to 40 Black people, rather than 400 Black people incarcerated.

Therefore, we demand that Madison and Dane County act swiftly to address structural racism and bias. One of the key reasons that Black people are incarcerated is because of poverty. Jails should not function as poor houses. Around 45% of people are incarcerated because they have not paid bails of \$1,000 or less. Therefore, they are not incarcerated for a public safety concern, but rather because they are poor. The proof of this, is that people with money, who have bails of both less and more than \$1,000 are not kept in jail—and this is not considered a public safety issue. Therefore we demand the immediate release of people incarcerated due to crimes of poverty.

An immediate step that you can take is to publicly release information about the demographics of who is incarcerated and who is referred to alternative programs, including data on race, ethnicity, and gender.

We demand that the average number of people in the jail is lowered by 100 by the end of March 2015, and a plan to meet the remaining 250 by the end of 2015. This again involves keeping people out so that we can get rid of the nearly 350 beds in the CCB.

In addition to the ways of getting people out listed above, we demand that your office advocate for changes in enforcement policies that disproportionately affect black people such as low level drug charges and retail theft

charges. We understand that the DA has the major role in this however your office has some influence and discretion in this matter.

3) End solitary confinement. Solitary confinement exacerbates mental health problems for all people.

With jail space freed up due to incarcerating fewer people, we believe there will be ways to more humanely and appropriately house people with mental health needs, as well as those who are “segregated” due to conflict or punishment.

We understand that the system of policing and incarceration is closely linked to the system of slavery and the continued oppression of Black people. Our ultimate goals include finding an alternative to policing and incarceration, and our steps forward as a community should reflect the values of community control and self-determination. We see solitary confinement as a form of torture and it must end.

We demand that the County Board pass a resolution to end solitary confinement and create a plan for humane alternatives to segregation within the jail.

We want a plan from your office by the end of February 2015 about how you will meet these demands.

We have professors, lawyers, and community members who are ready to assist in this if needed. We have a community invested in seeing that these demands are fully met.

Racial disparities have plagued Madison and Dane County for many years. Just as state violence is taking the lives of people like those flooding the media lately, it is taking the lives of countless black people in Madison.

To speak frankly, this is a matter of life and death. We must act urgently. As Dr. Martin Luther Day is fast approaching, and we all hope to be on the side of justice, we must ask- what would Dr. King do? What would he be advocating for? We look forward to celebrating changes made to racial disparities in 2015.

All Power to the People,
Young Gifted and Black Coalition