PUBLIC LETTER: Reduce our chronic dependence upon jails before spending $450 million in borrowed money to build a new one

Dear Mayor O'Connell and Metro Council Members,

We, the undersigned organizations, urge the Mayor's Office and Metro Council to remove the $35 million allocation for a $450 million new jail from the proposed Capital Spending Plan until they do their due diligence by collaborating with stakeholders and community members to address overcrowding—and poor conditions—at their root by identifying more cost-effective, research-backed, and humane solutions.

City leaders have stated that we need a new jail because it is "inhumane" to overcrowd people in a dilapidated facility. Far more inhumane is to hold hundreds of people in pretrial detention, to set bail unreasonably high, and to criminalize poverty and homelessness. All Nashvillians deserve dignified housing and safety but a jail cannot provide that.

Metro Nashville's jails are filled with hundreds of people whose detention serves no meaningful public safety function and instead jeopardizes community safety by exacerbating inequality. We can reduce Metro's dependence upon jails by reducing the number of people that the city jails and improve public safety in the process.

We request that the Mayor's Office, with the help of its director of Crime Reduction and Violence Prevention, Dr. Stephanie Bradley, convene stakeholders into a committee that will develop a robust, detailed, local system-wide plan to (a) reduce pretrial detention substantially, (b) reduce the cost of bail substantially, and (c) end the criminalization of poverty and homelessness—all of which can improve rather than compromise public safety.

Stakeholders should include leading local and national criminal justice reform experts, residents currently or formerly incarcerated in Nashville's jails and/or their family members, local organizations serving them, and key actors in Nashville's criminal justice system.

Concerning data about Nashville's jail system reinforces the need to think more expansively and act more innovatively to address the problem of too many people in a jail that is in poor condition. Those data include:

- **Pretrial detention** increased by 45% for felony offenses and more than doubled for misdemeanor offenses between FY22 and FY25.
- The number of **unhoused people held pretrial** for felonies increased by 57% and the number of unhoused people held pretrial for misdemeanors increased more than 268% between FY22 and FY25.
- The **national average** percentage of **unhoused people in jails**, as stated by Dave Rosenberg, is **4.5%**. In **Nashville**, unhoused people make up **9%** of the local jail population, twice the national average (as reported by WKRN).
- The **cost of bond** for felony offenses increased by more than $1,000 from FY22 to FY25. The number of felony and misdemeanor defendants who posted bond decreased during the same time period.
- **Case processing time**, and the amount of time it takes the District Attorney's office to file a charge, have both increased in recent years, resulting in increasingly lengthy jail stays for an increasing number of people not yet convicted of a crime.
- **Low-level public order offenses** that criminalize poverty account for 42% of the local jail population at any given time, which is more than twice as many as those jailed for violent offenses (20%). When you add in those jailed for criminal traffic offenses (5.6%), nearly half of the local jail population is detained for the lowest-level offenses.
- **ICE detainers**—federal requests to hold someone in a local jail so that ICE agents can take them into their custody—have risen dramatically in Nashville over the last few years.
- Former Sheriff Daron Hall stated in September 2026 that DCSO is having **"major, major, major trouble" retaining new hires** to staff local jails.

Extensive research by leading national criminal justice reform organizations such as the Brennan Center for Justice, the Vera Institute for Justice, and Prison Policy Initiative, among others, are clear that reducing pretrial detention, reducing or eliminating bail, and decriminalizing poverty significantly reduce dependence upon aging jail facilities, save cities public money that can be used for more preventative community safety measures, and pose zero risk to—and even potentially improve—public safety.

We can increase public safety without increasing our fiscal burden and can improve the life chances of people who have been criminalized but not yet been convicted of any crime by addressing the problem at its root.

Sincerely,

Free Hearts
Nashville People's Budget Coalition
Unheard Voices Outreach
Nashville Community Safety Network
NAACP Nashville Branch
NOAH (Transformational Justice Task Force)
American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee
Nashville Community Bail Fund
Open Table Nashville
Gideon's Army
Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (TADP)
Court Watch 615
Nashville Peacemakers
The Village
Middle Tennessee Democratic Socialists of America
Housing For All Tennessee
The ReMIX Way
TRANSFORM (Tennessee Raising Accountable and New Systems For Our Radical Movements)
Black Mental Health Village
Black Alliance for Peace Middle Tennessee Alliance
Stand Up Nashville
Glencliff United Methodist Church
Metropolitan Interdenominational Church
Edgehill United Methodist Church
Advancement Project

All data, except where otherwise noted, is sourced from a 2026 report by the Wren Collective.