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Date: January 23, 2019

To: Cook County Board of Commissioners

From: Health & Medicine Policy Research Group and the Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County

Regarding: Item #19-0687

We write in support of passage of Item #19-0687 An Ordinance to regulate and develop a long-term plan for the use of any Regional Gang Intelligence Database and affiliated data, introduced by Commissioner Alma Anaya.

Honorable Cook County Commissioners:

This statement is shared with you on the heels of the holiday honoring the late civil rights and racial justice activist the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, **“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhuman because it often results in physical death.”** With the ordinance focused on responsible planning for the Regional Gang Intelligence Database RGID, you have an opportunity to support health equity, public health, and racial justice in Cook County.

[Recommendation: Health & Medicine Policy Research Group and the Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County \(CHE Cook County\) write to urge you to vote in support of Item #19-0687.](#)

This ordinance will advance transparency by responsibly decommissioning the Cook County Regional Gang Intelligence Database (RGID) and handling the data in a manner that that is accountable to the public. Transparency and accountability on this issue are absolutely critical.

From a public health perspective, our organizations write to share our view that equitable public policy and practice within policing is a key issue to advancing health equity in Cook County and that eliminating the RGID with full transparency and accountability is an urgent need. It is troubling that this week’s Criminal Justice Committee meeting where this was supposed to have been discussed was cancelled, which mean that this matter was not given the attention that is required.

We urge that you use the power of your office to protect the health of the public and align your approach with the recently passed policy statement of the American Public Health Association, **Addressing Law Enforcement Violence as a Public Health Issue**, which stated in its summary, *“Physical and psychological violence that is structurally-mediated by the system of law enforcement results in deaths, injuries, trauma, and stress which disproportionately affect*

marginalized populations (e.g., people of color, immigrants, individuals experiencing houselessness, people with disabilities, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) community, individuals with mental illness, people who use drugs, and sex workers).” The full statement can be read here: <https://www.endingpoliceviolence.com>.ⁱ

Below are some of the many reasons for why we urge you to support and vote to pass this ordinance from a public health perspective.

- **The database exemplifies structural racism in policing.** While there has been a general lack of transparency, a June 2018 Freedom of Information Act related to the RGID request yielded an Excel document containing nearly 25,000 lines of data, each pertaining to a person represented in the RGID.ⁱⁱ Although the data related to the “race” of subjects in the database is incomplete (with many marked “unknown” or “null”), a review of the selection shows an disproportionate representation of people of color in Cook County--which is to say that the database is an example of structural racism in policing.
- **Structural racism harms public health and is a fundamental cause of health inequities.** One of the main purposes of the field of public health is to determine what causes health inequities and to intervene to eliminate and redress these causes, eliminate health inequities, and extend the length and quality of human lives. Racism in its many forms is a fundamental cause of both disease and health inequities. The Cook County Department of Public Health’s current WePlan **lists structural racism as a “fundamental cause of health inequity, associated with imbalances in political power throughout society. It functions to normalize and legitimize cultural, institutional, and personal hierarchies and inequity that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse health outcomes for people of color.”**ⁱⁱⁱ The County’s WePlan also lists one of our organizations, CHE Cook County, as the lead organization focused on health equity and racial justice for the Cook County Department of Public Health. So we advocate for you to take this step to reduce structural racism in public policy.
- **Being listed in a gang database can lead to denial of access to jobs and housing, receipt of further harassment by police, and in at least one case, deportation.** We are alarmed by the degree to which the RGID can be used to foster further racial discrimination in other public and private policies and practices, including access to key resources. Also alarming is the degree to which it can harm immigrants, despite Cook County having declared itself a “welcoming” county. Understanding health from a community perspective, the RGID harms not only the health of those who are directly impacted, but also their families, communities, and Cook County more broadly. Health inequities harm us all. Given that the Trump Administration has heightened threats, vitriolic rhetoric, and acts of police violence against immigrants and other groups facing marginalization, Cook County must live up to its declared

status as a welcoming county and stand up for immigrants and all groups of people facing structural violence. Responsible decommissioning of the RGID will support this.

- **Racism stratifies power and resources.** The mechanisms by which the apparent racism of the RGID cause health inequities are multifaceted and complex--and compounded by the broader context of structural racism in policing, public policy, and stratified access to material circumstances in our society. That said, racism in public policy and practice is unjust and we expect our commissioners to redress this. While we need clarity about the degrees and manner of racism within the RGID, the presence noted before is sufficient for us to support its decommissioning and to support transparency around what the data shows and accountability for what has happened and will happen moving forward. The reality that people of color are disproportionately represented in the database can be both understood as a *result* of and a *mechanism* of racist policing, because 1) it both results from well documented targeting of communities of color by police forces and tactics; and 2) it exists as an ongoing and future justification of racist policing that systematically harms communities of color. Again, given that racism in all its forms is unjust and it can be understood as a fundamental causal factor for health inequities, we urge you to take action to combat racism by passing this ordinance, and to fully support accountable and transparent decommissioning of the RGID as one significant means of rooting out racism in public policy and society more broadly.
- **The county's RGID lacks transparency and accountability, which are essential to the general public's trust and participation in our democracy.** Decommissioning the RGID must be done in an open and transparent process that emphasizes accountability and a full documentation of the problems and inequities with the database. Doing so will help advance better, more accountable government, and allow people to learn from our recent history, lest we repeat injustice, as is common throughout our history. The process outlined in the substitute ordinance, "TO REGULATE AND DEVELOP A LONG-TERM PLAN FOR THE USE OF ANY REGIONAL GANG INTELLIGENCE DATABASE AND AFFILIATED DATA" provides a means by which the decommissioning of the database can be done responsibly and in a way that supports learning from problematic public policy and practice, and that supports accountability.
- **The Cook County Board of Commissioners has an opportunity to set a positive precedent and example of national significance for responsible decommissioning of a gang database and eliminating one of the many mechanisms of racism in policing that is used around the US.** The Cook County gang database should be considered within its context, as a mechanism of racial injustice used not only by the Cook County Sheriff's Office, but also by the Chicago Police Department, and as having been shared with hundreds of jurisdictions. It has also been accessed by the US Department of Homeland Security. Racism in policing, incarceration, and

attacks on immigrants is a national crisis of unjust mass criminalization that harms the health of individuals, families, communities, and the whole of our society. By setting an example of working to undo racism in public policy and practice, Cook County can support racial justice and thus, public health, across the US. While this is not a sufficient step, it is necessary for advancing justice in Cook County and has implications beyond your jurisdiction.

- **As noted before, the American Public Health Association (APHA) recently passed a policy statement, Addressing Law Enforcement Violence as a Public Health Issue, which can help understand the links between health and inequitable policing.** The policy statement can serve as a useful guide for a public health approach to reducing police violence and inequity in policing. Again, it can be read here: <https://www.endingpoliceviolence.com>. Relevant to this vote, here are some quotes relevant to this matter:
 - “Namely, U.S. policing was historically deployed for the social control of communities deemed socially marginal (i.e., in the 19th century, it evolved from ruling-class efforts to control the immigrant working class in the North and slave patrols in the South) [50]. ... By encouraging drug arrests with cash incentives, loosening restrictions on searches, and creating a culture that encouraged law enforcement to repeatedly stop and search people of color without reasonable cause, the federal government disproportionately subjected marginalized communities to increased contact with the law enforcement system [51]. Data-driven policing is another example of a structural and targeted policing practice that links crime with place and race, and facilitates increased contact with law enforcement among marginalized communities [53, 54].”
 - “Structural racism embedded within ‘legal, social, and political systems...enable[s] police officers to disproportionately stop people of color, often without cause...with greater use of force [and] without any repercussions’ [79]. Protective laws and policies, obstruction from oversight, and cultural norms inhibit accountability, confound reform, and lead to harm, especially among marginalized communities.”
 - “As criminal justice scholars have argued, mass criminalization is a key mechanism through which communities of color experience heightened rates of law enforcement violence [12]. Others have concluded that disparities in contact with law enforcement may be a root cause of differential exposure to physical violence by law enforcement, and that ‘reducing inequality in police stops can simultaneously reduce inequalities in exposure to violence’ [1]. Therefore, a critical step in reducing both structurally-mediated physiological and psychological violence by law enforcement is to repeal laws that promote or justify increased scrutiny of specific populations. Such laws include those relating to drug use or possession, sex work, homelessness, and immigration. By removing justification for law enforcement intervention, this will reduce encounters between law enforcement officers and individuals whose activities are presently criminalized.”

As leaders in public health and health equity, our two organizations together urge Cook County Commissioners to advance public health, health equity, and racial justice by voting in support of Item #19-0687 An Ordinance to regulate and develop a long-term plan for the use of any Regional Gang Intelligence Database and affiliated data.

We can make ourselves available for discussion and questions about this issue and thank you for reading our comments.

Sincerely,

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ⁱ New American Public Health Association policy statements address gun suicides, tuberculosis prevention, global food security and more. November 13, 2018. Available at: <https://www.apha.org/news-and-media/news-releases/apha-news-releases/2018/2018-policy-statements>.

ⁱⁱ Dumke, Mick. Like Chicago Police, Cook County and Illinois Officials Track Thousands of People in Gang Databases. ProPublica Illinois. July 19, 2018. Available at: <https://www.propublica.org/article/politic-il-insider-additional-gang-databases-illinois-cook-county>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cook County Department of Public Health. WePlan2020. Improving Community Health & Health Equity for Suburban Cook County. 2016. Available at: <http://cookcountypublichealth.org/files/pdf/weplan/weplan2020-report-111416-final-lr-for-viewing-online.pdf>.