

Prosecutors asking police to book fewer people into jail during COVID outbreak

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Yakima County Prosecuting Attorney Joe Brusica is asking local police agencies to use discretion in deciding who is booked into jail.

In an email sent to police officials throughout the Yakima Valley on Tuesday, Brusica recommended that only violent offenders or those who pose clear threats to public safety be sent to jail because of concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We’re wanting to get people who shouldn’t be in the Yakima County jail or juvenile detention out of there,” Brusica said in a phone interview. “If an officer is going to arrest someone who has committed forgery or second-degree theft, they need to rethink that decision because that person is not going to stay in custody.”

The request comes after the Washington Supreme Court suspended all jury trials through April, and cut back on most court hearings due to the coronavirus outbreak. Prosecutors and jail staff are working to move nonviolent offenders who fall into the groups at highest risk for the virus out of detention.

A Yakima police commander said Brusica’s recommendation does not mean police won’t enforce the laws.

“We are going to continue to do police work and we are going to continue to refer cases” to the prosecutor, said Capt. Shawn Boyle, YPD’s patrol division commander.

The latest on what we know about the virus outbreak, the efforts to fight it, and what you need to know to keep you and your family safe.

Attempts to contact Yakima County Sheriff Bob Udell were not successful. He did not return phone messages by press time.

Brusica said the goal is to take the strain off Yakima County’s detention system. As of Tuesday, there were 706 inmates in the county jail, down from 920 earlier this month, Brusica said.

At the Yakima County Juvenile Justice Center, there are 20 youths being detained, which Brusica said was second to King County.

While police need to continue to aggressively investigate crimes and recommend charges to prosecutors, Brusica said booking into jail should be reserved for those who

are suspected of a violent or serious crime, present a clear threat to public safety or are suspected of a domestic violence offense.

Brusic said he can only recommend that officers exercise “common-sense discretion,” but said that nonviolent offenders likely will be released on bail or through the pretrial release program. For those not booked in, prosecutors will, if they charge, file summons for them to appear in court at a later date.

He’s also instructed his prosecutors to find cases where a plea agreement can move someone out of the jail, either to prison or released on time served.