

We the undersigned employees of the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) urge our senior leadership to issue a formal statement calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza to end the public health and humanitarian crisis that is worsening with each day.

The mission of SFDPH - to protect and promote health and well-being for all in San Francisco - grounds us all in a praxis that extends outward to vulnerable populations beyond this city and county. Since October 7th there has been mounting international condemnation of Israel's unrelenting retaliation to the attacks by Hamas on Israeli civilians and taking of hostages, and collective punishment of Palestinian civilians. Around the world and here in California, numerous human rights organizations, labor, educational, public health, and religious institutions have spoken out to demand a ceasefire. On November 14th, after five weeks of relentless bombing and devastation, the American Public Health Association joined those calling for an immediate ceasefire.

The disproportionate destruction, death, and suffering in Gaza cannot be understated. Against this backdrop, the silence of our San Francisco public health leaders is bewildering and profoundly disappointing. This absence of an unequivocal call for a ceasefire goes against the humanistic values that we as public health practitioners uphold.

We do not need to provide you with news of the over 11,000 dead civilians, many of whom are women, children, and infants. We do not need to provide you with news of the hundreds of healthcare providers and international aid workers being crushed to death or shot while trying to provide care to their patients and communities. We do not need to provide you with the stories of doctors performing surgery by flashlight and without access to anesthesia or clean water, forced to make decisions no one should ever have to make about which lives to try to save. Hospitals, clinics, and schools - if still standing - have become graveyards.

We hope this letter grounds you in your commitment to the values of equity, compassion for all - the commitment we all at SFDPH share - and the courage to bear witness and speak truth to power, refusing to turn away from suffering. Many of us have medical colleagues, family, and friends in both Palestine and Israel. Our patients and clients with deep connections to Gaza are profoundly traumatized by the systematic destruction of neighborhoods and families as well as the ongoing silence in the US regarding this disproportionate violence. We are grieving with all who are suffering horrific loss. The only way to ease the anguish of all directly and indirectly impacted by this unending spasm of violence that is upending the lives of Israelis and Palestinians is to join the growing chorus demanding an immediate ceasefire. Moreover, publicly calling for a ceasefire is the moral and ethical thing to do. To paraphrase Audre Lorde, our silence will not protect us. But it does speak volumes about SFDPH.

Are we willing to join the global public health community in advocating for an end to this senseless killing and destruction? Are you willing to call for an immediate ceasefire now? Reverend Martin Luther King said “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” We are all affected by this, and our collective action matters.