

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 21, 2021

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor of New York City
City Hall Park,
New York, NY 10007

Dear Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor Bill De Blasio,

We urgently write to you with concern on the current human rights violations and humanitarian crisis at Rikers Island Correctional Facility (Rikers). We strongly believe that those who are detained at Rikers should be immediately released and the facility shut down. It has become evident that the conditions at Rikers – which is overseen by the New York City Department of Corrections and receives federal funding from the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program – are deplorable, and nothing short of a humanitarian crisis. We believe that the conditions of the facility represent a gross mismanagement of those federal funds. As such, we believe that expanding the facility and hiring corrections officers will exacerbate the issue; and redirecting funds towards emergency medical support staff would be a better use of funds.

The jail complex has failed to provide detainees with basic services and the proper protections against COVID. During the September 13th visit to the facility, New York City Assemblymembers, Senators, and Congressmembers found the conditions people faced inside life-threatening and horrific. New York Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas witnessed, “countless men being piled on top of each other, laying in their own urine and feces and people not getting the care that they needed. There was a transgender woman who was placed in a male facility and not getting her hormones or medical care.”¹ And Neighborhood Defender Service Managing Director, Alice Fontier shared, “the toilets are overflowing onto the floor. They're packed in, 25 people in a cell, without masks, brought off the streets and crammed into here.”²

Despite these inhumane conditions existing for generations and the oversight of a U.S. Department of Justice-appointed federal monitor since March 2018, the state has witnessed an

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<https://www.cityandstateny.com/personality/2021/09/what-assembly-member-jessica-gonzalez-rojas-saw-rikers/185339/>

² <https://abc7ny.com/rikers--jail-prison-7-on-your-side-investigates/11017834/>

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increase in deaths at the facility. This year alone, eleven people have died under grotesque conditions of the facility, including Esias Johnson, a 24-year-old man who was being held on \$1 bail and whose family said he had struggled with mental illness.³ It is unconscionable to allow these conditions to persist any longer. As of September 16, 2021, over 4,600 of the roughly 6,000 people in DOC custody were being detained pretrial – representing over 76% of the system’s population – with nearly 1,500 detained for misdemeanor or non-violent crimes.⁴ It is our understanding that New York District Attorneys can discontinue asking for bail, to consent to defense attorney’s applications for the release of currently incarcerated people that are at high risk, and rapidly resolve cases with non-carceral dispositions. We believe that these actions will help alleviate the crisis.

Furthermore, we believe that the hiring of more corrections officers to address the ongoing situation represents a mismanagement of federal funds. This is not a staffing shortage; this is a management issue that cannot be resolved with an increased headcount. As many as one-third of corrections officers are failing to show up for their shifts on a daily basis, leaving their colleagues to pull double or triple shifts, exhausted and unable to do their job.⁵ Medical experts agree that decarceration is a proven method in addressing this crisis.⁶ In a recent letter to the New York City Council from the Chief Medical Officer of Correctional Health Services, it was revealed that “decarceration efforts, which are a proven public health response to COVID-19, have not been meaningfully pursued since 2020.”⁷ Health experts have pointed to the need to provide resources for emergency medical support staff to adequately address overcrowded areas where patients are detained for days and secure clinical spaces and medical devices so that healthcare professionals can perform necessary treatments.

The current conditions experienced at Rikers are inhumane, unconstitutional, and a public health crisis. We believe federal funds should be used to decarcerate and shut down the facility immediately, as well as provide social, economic, psychological, and physical health support to all those that are released to ensure their safe re-entry into our community

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter. We look forward to your timely actions.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/14/nyregion/de-blasio-rikers-.html>

⁴ <https://greaterjusticenyc.vera.org/nycjail/>

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<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/another-inmate-dies-at-rikers-increasing-years-total-to-at-least-11/3280714/>

⁶ <https://www.ny1.com/content/dam/News/static/nyc/pdfs/RM-city-council-letter-9-10-21.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.ny1.com/content/dam/News/static/nyc/pdfs/RM-city-council-letter-9-10-21.pdf>

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Sincerely,



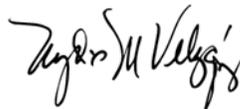
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



Jamaal Bowman
Member of Congress



Jerry Nadler
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

CC:

Honorable Darcel Clark, Bronx District Attorney

Honorable Eric Gonzalez, Brooklyn District Attorney

Honorable Melinda Katz, Queens District Attorney

Honorable Michael McMahon, Staten District Attorney

Honorable Cy Vance Jr., Manhattan District Attorney