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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

***LEGAL AID CALLS ON CITY TO PROVIDE COLD WATER,
ICE, COOLING TO PROTECT
INCARCERATED NEW YORKERS FROM DANGEROUS
HEAT CONDITIONS IN CITY JAILS; MORE HIGH HEAT
DAYS AHEAD***

(NEW YORK, NY) – The Legal Aid Society’s Prisoners’ Rights Project (PRP), in a letter to City Hall and the New York City Department of Correction (DOC), called on the City to protect incarcerated New Yorkers during the hot days ahead, after dangerous conditions were reported last weekend. Another heat wave with 90 degree temperatures will hit New York City this Sunday, lasting for three consecutive days.

PRP interviews with numerous clients after last weekend’s heat wave revealed that conditions remained wholly unacceptable, with DOC failing to protect individuals from a high risk of heat-related illnesses, such as heat exhaustion or stroke. Clients described heat rashes, feeling faint, having trouble breathing, and in a few occasions, requiring emergency treatment.

Most of the jails are not air-conditioned. Prior to the latest heat emergency, PRP asked that the City move individuals confined to their cells to air-conditioned housing and ensure that those not in air-conditioned housing were provided with ameliorative measures, like cold water, ice and access to cold showers.

Many clients reported only warm or hot water showers, which do not cool the body. Fans did not cool these large areas, let alone the interiors of cells. Even those held in nominally air-conditioned areas reported air-conditioners that did not work. More critically, once people were locked into cells – for anywhere from 10 to 23 hours at a stretch – there was no access to showers, fans or cold bathing water.

PRP learned this week that many individuals designated as “heat sensitive” by Correctional Health Services because their age, medications or medical condition make them particularly vulnerable to high heat, are not being properly housed in air conditioned areas. Moreover, individuals in Enhanced Security Housing, who can be locked in un-air conditioned cells for up to 25 hours in a row, were not moved and were not provided with access to cold showers during the hours they were locked in their cells. Several individuals housed in units with the capacity for air conditioning, including medical infirmary areas, reported air conditioning that was turned off or not working properly.

“Free people can protect themselves in summer heat with self or community help, finding public or private air-conditioned spaces, taking cold showers, drinking ice water, using sprinklers and City pools,” said **Mary Lynne Werlwas, Director of the Prisoners’ Rights Project at The Legal Aid Society.** “You cannot simultaneously take away an individual’s access to self-help, and refuse to provide other cooling measures. The City must take the necessary measures to protect people from the dangers posed by high temperatures.”

If you are concerned about a loved one at Rikers Island or other City jails, call the Board of Correction at 212-669-7900 to make a report.

The letter states:

Sunday will begin another heat streak, with forecasts of three straight days of temperatures over 90 degrees and even higher “real feel” temperatures. Given our clients’ reports we have sent you from last weekend’s heat, the Board of Correction’s findings, and the lack of communication from you about sufficient remedial measures since then, we have little confidence that incarcerated people will be kept at safe temperatures during these high heat days... We reiterate our request that the City move all individuals confined to their cells to air conditioned areas. When people are not in air-conditioned areas, the City must provide free and continual access to cold showers and ice to all persons, including during lock-in times.

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The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For over 140 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities.

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