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Contact:

Redmond Haskins

The Legal Aid Society

(929) 441-2384

rhaskins@legal-aid.org

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

***Legal Aid Demands The Immediate Release of Incarcerated New Yorkers After
Second LAS Client - Walter Ance - Dies In DOC Custody From COVID-19***

(NEW YORK, NY) – **The Legal Aid Society** reaffirmed the need for the immediate release of incarcerated New Yorkers at local jails after the death of Walter Ance, a Legal Aid client who passed away Saturday from COVID-19 in the custody of the New York City Department of Correction (DOC). Mr. Ance, 63, was held pretrial at Rikers Island for roughly 13 months. According to the City, Mr. Ance was considered high risk if he contracted COVID-19 due to his age and because he suffered from diabetes and prostate issues.

Demonstrating the rapid pace at which the virus spreads within carceral settings, in New York City, as of April 13, 2020, 323 incarcerated New Yorkers had tested positive for COVID-19. Already, 7.8 percent of people incarcerated in City jails have contracted COVID-19, a percentage almost 6 times higher than New York City, 7.8 times higher than New York State, and 44.2 times higher than the rest of the country.

“We are heartbroken over the loss of Walter Ance, our client who was held pretrial at Rikers Island for roughly 13 months. Mr. Ance suffered from a litany of health issues, but despite these conditions and warnings from the City, the Queens County District Attorney’s Office refused to consent to his release,” said **Tina Luongo, Attorney-in-Charge of the Criminal Defense Practice at The Legal Aid Society**. "Our continuing efforts were entirely ignored, and as a result, Mr. Ance died handcuffed to a bed. These avoidable deaths will continue to mount so long as our DAs ignore the reality that jails are breeding grounds for this virus, infecting our clients and Correction staff alike at

an unrivaled rate. Regardless of the crimes our clients are alleged to have committed, no New Yorker who is seriously ill should face a death sentence at Rikers Island before a jury has even had a chance to judge their guilt or innocence. We extend our condolences to Mr. Ance’s family, friends and community at this difficult time.”

Last week, Rachael Bedard, Director of the Geriatrics and Complex Care Services for the City's Correctional Health Services, penned an [opinion piece](#) in the *Washington Post* calling for “decarceration on a mass scale” as an “urgent public health demand and outbreak mitigation strategy.” Bedard concluded her piece by writing “no one deserves to die in handcuffs.”

[Photo of Walter Ance for use.](#)

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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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