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Contact:

Press Office, The Legal Aid Society ([press@legal-aid.org](mailto:press@legal-aid.org))

Sarah Duggan, Brooklyn Defender Services ([SDuggan@bds.org](mailto:SDuggan@bds.org))

Emily Whitfield, The Bronx Defenders ([Ewhitfield@bronxdefenders.org](mailto:Ewhitfield@bronxdefenders.org))

Sam McCann, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem ([SMccann@ndsny.org](mailto:SMccann@ndsny.org))

Lupe Todd-Medina, New York County Defender Services ([LToddmedina@nycds.org](mailto:LToddmedina@nycds.org))

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

## ***NYC Defenders Demand Courthouse Safety as the Delta Variant of COVID-19 Surges in New York City***

**(NEW YORK, NY) – The Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn Defender Services, The Bronx Defenders, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, and New York County Defender Services** sent a letter to the Office of Court Administration today calling for the immediate implementation of safety protocols to protect both clients and staff from COVID-19 as the city experiences a surge in the highly transmittable Delta variant of the virus.

Specifically, the letter calls for OCA to take the following steps to ensure the safety of everyone in the city's courthouses:

- Provide an N95 or KN95 mask to anyone who arrives in a courthouse without a mask or who requests one and ensure that everyone complies with the mask mandate.
- Conduct all non-dispositive appearances virtually, unless a client requests an in-person appearance.
- Schedule and locate arraignments on appearance tickets in such a way that crowds do not gather in the hallways outside courtrooms.
- Reinstitute screening and separation of symptomatic people in custody.

- Provide documentation to confirm that all detention areas of all courthouses now have air filtration systems rated MERV 13 or higher or place air purifiers with HEPA filters in areas with poor air circulation.

The letter urges these steps as a direct response to the increasingly grim COVID-19 trends in New York City. Over the last two weeks, infections have more than doubled and hospitalizations have grown by nearly 50 percent, while reports of infected people in courthouses have also surged.

Unsafe courthouse conditions are particularly concerning given the fact that COVID-19 has already had an outsized impact on Black and brown New Yorkers who are also most likely to be forced into court by unjust policing. The criminal legal system worsening an outbreak in the communities we serve would only compound these injustices.

“While we welcome the recent announcement by the Office of Court Administration (OCA) of a return to a requirement that people in courthouses wear masks, more and swifter action is needed to protect our clients, our staff, and everyone who uses the courthouses from unacceptable, avoidable risk,” the letter reads in part. “OCA’s relaxation of pandemic rules was based on the belief that fully vaccinated people were unlikely to become sick or spread the virus, but this belief does not stand up to current data on the Delta variant. A broader reconsideration of the relaxation of those rules is warranted.”

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