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

Elected Officials Detail Illegal, Deadly Conditions Inside Rikers Island Following Visit

(NEW YORK, NY) – Following a spate of deaths and reports of illegal, dangerous conditions in city jails, 14 elected officials visited Rikers Island today, alongside public defenders and advocates, to observe the facility firsthand.

Representative Jamaal Bowman, Senator Alessandra Biaggi, Senator Jabari Brisport, Senator Jessica Ramos, Senator Julia Salazar, Assemblymember Kenny Burgos, Assemblymember Emily Gallagher, Assemblymember Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas, Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani, Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes, Assemblymember Amanda Septimo, Assemblymember Phara Souffrant Forrest, City Council Member Brad Lander, and Public Advocate Jumaane Williams all visited the facilities.

The elected officials were also joined by Tiffany Cabán, Democratic Nominee for City Council and representatives from Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem and the Legal Aid Society. Min. Dr. Victoria Phillips of the Jails Action Coalition and Paul Rivera from the Less is More Coalition also spoke at the press conference.

The elected officials describe a jail in deadly disarray. Based on their tour of Rikers buildings, including Otis Bantum Correctional Center (OBCC), Anna M. Kross Center (AMKC), Robert N. Davoren Center, and George R. Vierno Center, and their conversations with incarcerated people, they note that:

DOC has failed to provide regular food and medicine to people in its custody

DOC is locking people in showers amidst their own feces and urine, in suicide watch units without actual professional supervision, and in other forms of de facto solitary confinement.

DOC has failed to provide incarcerated people with their constitutionally-guaranteed access to counsel and the courts

With a jail population over 6,000, the facilities are overwhelmed. The current population has surged above pre-pandemic levels, leaving people in squalid and unbearable conditions.

DOC has failed to follow COVID protocols, including the failure to medically isolate COVID-positive people from others held in DOC custody.

The intake system is in shambles, with hundreds of people languishing for weeks without being fully processed into the jail. That has left incarcerated New Yorkers held in particularly dangerous conditions, without access to basic human necessities, and in some cases sleeping in sewage.

The intense toll the jail conditions have taken on mental health, leading to a surge in self-harm: Nine people have died in DOC custody this year, and three on Rikers in the past month, with self-harm reaching an alarming rate of 95 incidents per 1,000 people.

The elected officials' observations confirmed both the depth of that crisis and the need to address it by reducing the number of people held in city jails. The visit, which the de Blasio administration tried to prevent, comes before a key city council hearing on the crisis inside Rikers on Wednesday.

At a press conference following the visit, officials called on the city and state to use every tool at its disposal to decarcerate immediately: urging prosecutors to stop seeking cash bail and judges to stop setting it; urging the mayor to grant incarcerated people work release under Correction Law Article 6-A, just as he did at the start of the pandemic; and calling on the governor to sign and implement the Less is More Act immediately, which would drastically reduce the jail population by reforming the punitive parole system.

They also urged the mayor to take all available measures to address the staff absenteeism, and alleviate the staffing crisis principally by reducing the number of incarcerated people, thereby reducing need.

“What we saw today inside Rikers, along with the persistence of understaffing and absenteeism, is ample justification for us to urgently and immediately pursue decarceration,” **Rep. Jamaal Bowman** said. “The 10 deaths at Rikers this year and the self-harm rate, which has skyrocketed to 95 incidents per 1,000 people, are unacceptable byproducts of a system that over-incarcerates the underserved. Rather than spending nearly a half-a-million dollars for a year of imprisonment, we must proactively invest in the mental, social, and emotional health of those at-risk. There is a clear path forward to transform our system from one of punitive punishment to one of compassion and care. We must move to end cash bail, advocate for the Mayor’s use of Correction Law Article 6-A, and prioritize the Governor’s passing of the Less is More Act to release those who are incarcerated for technical or non-criminal parole violations.”

“For at least a decade, sending people to Rikers Island has become a death sentence. The current inhumane conditions have resulted in a dramatic spike in self-harm among the incarcerated, with many becoming so hopeless that choosing to end their life is deemed a better option than remaining another day on Rikers,” said **Senator Alessandra Biaggi**. “We have failed to ensure the safety of incarcerated New Yorkers, and inaction is no longer an option. We must work in collaboration with the City to immediately reduce the number of incarcerated individuals on Rikers Island and ensure no individual is forced to live in these current conditions.”

“The conditions on Rikers Island are heartbreaking, deplorable, and unacceptable for both the people who are incarcerated and those expected to care for them. In the hours I spent there, I saw about a dozen men in one cell, many who haven’t received their medication in days and weeks, and I even saw a man try to take his own life,” said **State Senator Jessica Ramos**. “Rikers needs to close and we need to do it responsibly. In the immediate, basic human needs like daily showers, toilet paper, unexpired food, physical and mental health, recreational time and access to the law library must be met. Then we must pass my bill to prohibit correction officers from working triple shifts while our judicial partners work harder to expedite cases. We cannot continue to violate their human rights.”

“Ten Rikers inmates have died in 2021 alone. This includes the recent deaths of Esias Johnson and Brandon Rodriguez, both 24 and 25 respectively,” said **Assemblymember Kenny Burgos**. “The ongoing humanitarian crisis at this facility is an outrage and a miscarriage of justice. I continue to reiterate my call to immediately close Rikers and finally put an end to decades of human rights abuse.”

“The atrocities that my colleagues and I witnessed at OBCC highlights the real emergency and humanitarian crisis that has taken hold on Rikers Island. While on the tour I witnessed an attempt at suicide and basic needs being denied including the need for food and hydration, medical care, and sanitation,” said **Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas**. “The situation is dire. The Mayor and Governor must act immediately to manage this situation

on the island for the people who are incarcerated and staff. Then we must enact criminal justice legislation to decarcerate, which is an evidence-based solution to public safety and health.”

“What I saw in Rikers today is a crisis, one of mass incarceration. This crisis is entirely of our own making,” said **Assembly Member Zohran K. Mamdani**. “Too many prosecutors and district attorneys across New York City are sentencing working class New Yorkers to the possibility of death by charging bail. We must decarcerate now, and one of the first steps is ending cash bail.”

“What I witnessed today at Rikers Island was nothing less than a humanitarian crisis, a horror house of abuse and neglect that cannot be tolerated or ignored. Many more will needlessly die unless we rapidly decarcerate and the first step is Governor Hochul signing the Less is More legislation we passed in June,” said **Assemblymember Emily Gallagher**. “I thank the people being held in subhuman conditions for bravely sharing their anguish with us today. You are not alone.”

“After seeing the conditions at Rikers today it is clearer than ever to me that our current criminal legal policies are exposing individuals and their families to enormous harm and trauma, leading to severe and dangerous outcomes for those who are affected by it,” said **Assemblymember Phara Souffrant Forrest**. “This underlines especially the need for major reform to our parole system, and I would like to see my bill, the Less is More Act, signed by the Governor as quickly as possible and implemented immediately thereafter. I also very much look forward to our next legislative session, where we need to consider and pass other necessary parole reforms like Fair and Timely Parole and Elder Parole.”

“The deadly dysfunction at Rikers that has killed 10 people this year, most recently 24-year-old Esias Johnson last week, is unconscionable. New York City spends more on locking people up than nearly any other city in the country, a whopping \$447,000 per person per year. Yet right now there are people locked up at Rikers in crowded units without sufficient food, medical services, or even staff to take them to court appearances,” said **Councilmember Brad Lander**. “This is a humanitarian crisis, one of our own making. Mayor de Blasio, Governor Hochul, judges, and DAs must use all the tools at their disposal to reduce the number of people incarcerated at Rikers, right now, to alleviate this crisis and move forward towards closing the inhumane Rikers complex as swiftly as possible.”

“The depraved indifference for human life has gone on long enough. It's time for those in power — the Mayor, District Attorneys, and judges — to act with the same sense of urgency those closest to the crisis have called for: decarcerate Rikers,” said **Tiffany Cabán, Democratic Nominee for City Council**. “Decarceration proved effective at the height of the pandemic in 2020, and it can be effective again today. Anything less is a potential death sentence.”

“There is an urgent public health crisis that requires the Mayor, DAs, judges and the City Council to fully decarcerate its jails immediately, stop sending any other person to face the risk of death, and end solitary confinement, medical deprivation, and all abuse,” said **Min. Dr. Victoria A. Phillips of the Jails Action Coalition**. “Once again I repeat for every life behind the walls depending on those in position of power to make change, now is the moment to act.”

“It is impossible to overstate how dangerous - and ultimately deadly - the conditions facing New Yorkers on Rikers Island are. Quite simply: DOC is holding people in illegal conditions, denying New Yorkers their rights, and as a result people have died,” said **Alice Fontier, Managing Director of Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem**. “We are grateful to the elected officials who toured the facilities today, and are shining a necessary light on the abject conditions in which the city holds our neighbors and clients. We agree: the only path forward is immediately reducing the jail population using every tool at the city and state’s disposal.”

“The deplorable and unprecedented conditions currently facing our clients at Rikers Island should alarm - indeed, they should outrage - all New Yorkers. To stave off further loss of life, City Hall must work with local prosecutors and the State to immediately decarcerate,” said **Tina Luongo, Attorney-In-Charge of the Criminal Defense**

Practice at The Legal Aid Society. “The Legal Aid Society thanks the many elected officials who demanded a tour of the facility to draw further attention to the humanitarian crisis affecting scores of our incarcerated clients, the overwhelming majority of whom are from communities of color.”

“Rikers Island is a human rights nightmare that would spark international condemnation if it were happening in another country,” said **Justine Olderman, Executive Director of The Bronx Defenders.** “The City has blood on its hands and must act now before more lives are lost or destroyed. The only answer to this crisis is immediate decarceration – get people out of Rikers now.”

“We have rallied, we have tweeted, we have screamed at the top of our lungs: what is happening in our city jails is a complete humanitarian collapse and a violation of the 8th Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment,” said **Stan Germán, Executive Director of New York County Defender Services.** “At this point, silence and feigned ignorance are no excuse. The mayor, the judges and our city’s district attorneys who refuse to take any measures to substantially reduce the city jail population are now complicit in this abject cruelty, which is leading New Yorkers to their deaths.”

“The unconscionable conditions that incarcerated people are enduring at Rikers represent an unprecedented crisis,” said **Kelsey De Avila, Jail Services Project Director at Brooklyn Defender Services.** “The Department of Correction is failing to protect the health, safety, and lives of those incarcerated in city jails, and every day that action is not taken to reduce the jail population results in more suffering and risk of death. We urge our judges, prosecutors, and state and local leaders to use their powers to remove as many people as possible from this life-threatening environment. We thank the elected officials who came to Rikers today to witness these dire conditions and urge others to join them in using their platforms to shine a light on this emergency.”

"It is the responsibility of our elected officials, and those who enjoy freedom and liberty, to ensure both for all. We need to secure the mental and physical well-being of those being held prisoner, and make sure they survive. There is a crisis at Rikers Island leading to the death of people regularly. It is a crisis which can be easily addressed with the signing of the Less Is More New York Act, and enacting it immediately. This is why we're calling on Governor Hochul to sign and implement the Less Is More New York Act immediately," said **Paul Rivera, Member of the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice.** “We need the support of the people and of the organizations that have been calling for the closure of Rikers Island; and who have been fighting for restorative justice. With the passing and implementation of the Less Is More New York Act, we can immediately alleviate deaths from Covid-19, and assaults by staff and others, through decarceration and the closing of this Island.”

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