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

## ***DOC Commissioner: COVID-19 Infection Rate Skyrocketing in Local Jails***

***Positivity Rate Doubled in Last Day from 9.5% to 17%***

***Only 38% of Incarcerated People in DOC Custody Fully Vaccinated***

**(NEW YORK, NY) - The Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn Defender Services, The Bronx Defenders, New York County Defender Services, Queens Defenders and Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem** called for the immediate release of incarcerated people and the halt of new admissions to New York City jails in response to a [letter](#) from New York City Department of Correction (DOC) Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi which notes that the COVID-19 positivity rate at Rikers Island continues to skyrocket due to the Omicron variant.

The letter states:

*“While much of New York City may be spared the worst possible impacts of the Omicron variant due to relatively high vaccination rates, only 45% of our incarcerated population has received one shot of the vaccine, and only 38% is fully vaccinated. Until ten days ago, for the past several months our COVID positivity rate was consistently hovering at approximately 1%. Yesterday it was 9.5%. Today it is over 17%.*

*The combination of these data indicates that the risks to the human beings in our custody are at a crisis level. As you are aware, considerable efforts were made at the beginning of the pandemic*

*to reduce the jail population immediately in order to avert a major humanitarian catastrophe. All indications suggest that our jail population faces an equal or greater level of risk from COVID now as it did at the start of the pandemic.*

*We are doing what we can to limit the spread of Omicron. Sadly, that includes the suspension of congregate services and in-person visitation, additional movement protocols for individuals who may have been exposed to COVID, and reductions in programming. These measures will have considerable negative effects on a jail population that is still reeling from two years of COVID and a staffing crisis that has contributed to unprecedented levels of tension, anxiety, and violence within the jails. The consequences of removing these basic services and supports from those in our custody will be felt by both persons in custody and the officers who work hard every day to keep people here safe. We believe we have no choice.*

*I implore you to ask the courts to similarly consider every available option to reduce the number of individuals in our jail. Whether that means seeking supervised release in more cases or identifying cases that can be resolved with modifications to sentence length or requesting compassionate release for individuals who are at higher risk due to underlying medical conditions, I leave to your professional judgment.”*

**In response, New York City public defender organizations stated:**

“As New York City experiences a massive surge in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, our fears that the virus would ravage the City’s jails have been realized, with positivity rates for people held in DOC custody doubling in the last 24 hours.

The virus is spreading like wildfire throughout Rikers Island and other DOC facilities, exacerbating an ongoing humanitarian crisis that has already taken the lives of sixteen people this year and forced countless others to endure life-threatening conditions while in custody.

Thousands of incarcerated New Yorkers are suffering, and DOC has proven to be incapable of caring for the health and safety of the people in its custody throughout the pandemic. Without immediate decarceration, more lives will be lost. We urge judges, District Attorneys, and elected officials at every level of government to take immediate action to release people and halt new jail admissions.”

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