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Color Of Change

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***Defenders, Advocates and Impacted New Yorkers Call on Judges, DAs and Elected Officials to Immediately Decarcerate Local Jails***

***Call for Urgent Action Comes on the Last Day of Black History Month and In Response to Another New Yorker Passing Away in City Custody***

(NEW YORK, N.Y.) — Today, the **Black Attorneys of Legal Aid Caucus (BALA)**, **Color Of Change**, the **Freedom Agenda of the Urban Justice Center**, **VOCAL-NY**, **elected officials**, **impacted New Yorkers and others**, marked the last day of Black History Month and in response to another New Yorker [passing away](#) on City custody, by holding a rally outside the gates of Rikers Island calling on judges, District Attorneys, elected officials and others to immediately facilitate the decarceration of the city’s jails.

The rally came amid continued reports of the harsh treatment and ongoing suffering of Black and Latinx New Yorkers, who make up 90 percent of people held in the City’s jails. In 2021 alone, 16 New Yorkers [lost their lives](#) in city jails and individuals still [lack access to critical medical care](#).

Activists have already [called on](#) local officials to put an end to this mass incarceration crisis, demanding that New York City District Attorneys take immediate action to reduce the population. Despite this, officials continue to remand and apply bail to New Yorkers who are presumed innocent, subjecting them to pretrial detention for weeks, months and even years at a time.

Today’s action also comes as Mayor Eric Adams has called on Albany lawmakers to enact a “dangerousness” provision to New York’s bail statute, further empowering judges to continue their unfair, biased practices that further entrench communities of color in the criminal legal system. Earlier this week, Albany lawmakers rightly [rejected](#) the Mayor’s plea to reform these historic pretrial reforms that were ushered into law in 2019 with wide ranging support. Activists gathered to ensure that efforts to defend the rights of New Yorkers do not stop there.

“Rikers Island is New York City's most obvious badge of slavery. The time is long overdue for it to be eliminated,” said **Zamir Ben-Dan**, representative of **BALA**.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the inhumane conditions that have existed on Rikers Island for the past several decades. In the last year alone, sixteen New Yorkers have died on Rikers Island as a result of the inhumane conditions there. This says nothing of the physical, mental, and emotional traumas suffered by those detainees fortunate enough to survive their stay. How many more people must die before New York City’s leadership addresses this ongoing humanitarian crisis? Pretrial detention should not be a death sentence. Release those detained, and close Riker’s now,” said **Julia Jenkins, representative of BALA.**

“Our members, who have endured the torture of Rikers, know that many demands of the civil rights movement remain unfulfilled - including the demands for equal justice and human rights. New York City’s jails today are a humanitarian crisis, but judges, prosecutors and too many electeds seem comfortable sending primarily Black New Yorkers there to suffer and die. We need immediate decarceration, transparency, and accountability before more lives are lost or forever damaged,” said **Darren Mack, co-director of Freedom Agenda.**

“The humanitarian crisis at Rikers Island continues unabated, and the only solution is decarceration. We can no longer accept a system of injustice that lacks any accountability and puts Black and brown people in grave danger. We call on New York’s elected officials — starting with the city’s prosecutors — to address this ongoing disaster and immediately adopt a decarceration strategy,” said **Rashad Robinson, president of Color Of Change.**

"The call for public health and safety must include our community members who are caged on Rikers. For our members, Rikers Island is a source of ongoing trauma and violence for themselves and their loved ones. Decarceration is public safety and must be a top priority," said **Keli Young, Civil Rights Campaign Coordinator at VOCAL-NY.**

“Day in and day out, the staff of The Legal Society bears witness to the severe abuse incarcerated people, the majority of whom are Black and Latinx New Yorkers, face while caged at Rikers Island,” said **Tina Luongo, Attorney-In-Charge of the Criminal Defense Practice at The Legal Aid Society.** “We stand in solidarity today, the last day of Black History Month, with the Black Attorneys of Legal Aid Caucus, fellow public defenders, advocates and our clients, and echo demands for the immediate decarceration of local jails.”

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