

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051  
MINORITY (202) 225-5074  
<https://oversight.house.gov>

June 27, 2022

Mr. Brendan McGuire  
Chief Counsel  
Rikers Island Interagency Task Force  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Mr. Phillip Banks  
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chief Counsel McGuire and Deputy Mayor Banks:

We write to request a briefing from the Rikers Island Interagency Task Force on the status of efforts to improve conditions at Rikers Island. Following a federal court's recent approval of the City's plan to improve conditions at Rikers, we seek to better understand how the Task Force plans to tackle this crisis, including how you plan to protect the safety, health, and rights of detainees.<sup>1</sup> We urge you to prioritize the physical health, mental health, and safety of both detainees and staff when implementing solutions to Rikers' multifaceted problems.<sup>2</sup>

Last September, the Oversight Committee launched an investigation into conditions on Rikers Island after media reports described a collapse of basic jail operations, uninhabitable conditions, and an alarming number of in-custody deaths at Rikers.<sup>3</sup> Chairwoman Maloney and Rep. Ocasio-Cortez visited Rikers to inspect these conditions firsthand, and Committee staff received information and briefings from the Mayor's office, all five New York City district attorney offices, the New York City Department of Corrections (DOC), and Correctional Health Services (CHS).

Eight months later, the conditions at Rikers have continued to deteriorate, further jeopardizing the physical and mental health and safety of both detainees and staff. There are currently 5,503 detainees on Rikers, a nearly 30% increase from April 2020. Last year, 15

---

<sup>1</sup> *Nunez v. City of New York, et al.*, 1:11-cv-05845-LTS-JCF (S.D.N.Y. June 14, 2022) (online at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/press-releases/2022/Dkt-466-Swain-Order.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup> Exec. Order No. 16 (May 12, 2022) (online at [www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/016-002/executive-order-16](https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/016-002/executive-order-16)).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform, et al. to Mayor Bill de Blasio, New York City, and Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi, New York City Department of Corrections (Sept. 27, 2021) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2021-09-27.CBM%20JR%20AOC%20to%20de%20Blasio%20Schiraldi-NYC%20re%20Rikers%20Island%20Conditions.pdf>).

detainees died at Rikers, more than twice the number of people from the previous year. The number of suicides in 2021 alone was more than the previous five years combined.<sup>4</sup> This year, nine individuals have already died while incarcerated at Rikers—three more than had died at this point last year—and one correctional officer has committed suicide.<sup>5</sup> These deaths highlight the unsafe and harmful conditions for detainees and staff working within the jail complex, and underscore the urgent need for action.

On April 8, 2022, we wrote to Mayor Adams to urge him to take steps to ensure that individuals experiencing mental illness who are detained at Rikers are able to access the treatment services they need.<sup>6</sup>

On May 12, 2022, Mayor Adams issued Executive Order 16, establishing a Task Force comprised of numerous city agencies, including the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, the New York City Law Department, and the New York City Office of Management and Budget, all of which have responsibility and oversight over the physical structure of Rikers Island and its staff.<sup>7</sup> The Rikers Island Interagency Task Force will coordinate multiple agencies “to implement the recommended reforms as swiftly and efficiently as possible to keep those in custody and correctional officers safe, and to build a functional, safe, and humane jail system.”<sup>8</sup>

We are concerned that there are currently no Task Force members specifically dedicated to ensuring that the mental and physical health of those detained at the facility are appropriately considered and prioritized. This is particularly important in light of recent reports of “frightening” and “chaotic” conditions at the intake facility on Rikers, with detainees being packed into “tight filthy pens, urinating on the floor.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *More Suicides at NYC Jails This Year Than Past Five Combined, Report Says*, New York Post (Oct. 14, 2021) (online at <https://nypost.com/2021/10/14/more-suicides-at-nyc-jails-this-year-than-past-five-combined/>).

<sup>5</sup> *3 N.Y.C. Detainees Die in Less than a Week, Bringing Year’s Total to 9*, New York Times (June 22, 2022) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2022/06/22/nyregion/rikers-inmate-deaths.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/22/nyregion/rikers-inmate-deaths.html)); *NYC Correction Officer Jumps to Death from Verrazzano Bridge*, New York Post (May 13, 2022) (online at <https://nypost.com/2022/05/13/nyc-correction-officer-jumps-to-death-from-verrazzano-bridge/>).

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney, Committee on Oversight and Reform, et al. to Mayor Eric Adams, New York City (Apr. 8, 2022) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2022-04-08.CBM%20JR%20AOC%20to%20Adams-NY%20re%20Rikers%20Mental%20Health.pdf>).

<sup>7</sup> Exec. Order No. 16 (May 12, 2022) (online at [www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/016-002/executive-order-16](http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/016-002/executive-order-16)).

<sup>8</sup> New York City Office of the Mayor, *Press Release: Mayor Adams Announces Interagency Task Force to Bring Full Resources and Expertise of City Government to Remedy Rikers Island Crisis* (May 12, 2022) (online at [www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/296-22/mayor-adams-interagency-task-force-bring-full-resources-expertise-city](http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/296-22/mayor-adams-interagency-task-force-bring-full-resources-expertise-city)).

<sup>9</sup> *No Immediate Federal Takeover at Rikers, Even as Lack of Bathrooms Leads Inmates to Urinate on the Floor*, Gothamist (June 14, 2022) (online at <https://gothamist.com/news/no-immediate-federal-takeover-at-rikers-even-as-lack-of-bathrooms-leads-inmates-to-urinate-on-the-floor>).

According to information provided by DOC and CHS at a briefing for Committee staff, detainees missed 12,700 medical appointments in March 2022.<sup>10</sup> A major reason for the missed appointments was a shortage of correctional staff, exacerbated by chronic absenteeism experienced by DOC during the pandemic. A recent report by the New York City Board of Corrections attributed multiple in-custody deaths this year to inadequate medical follow-up, failures to transport patients to medical appointments, and failure to provide essential medications.<sup>11</sup>

Nearly two-thirds of the Rikers population—approximately 63%—have received treatment for a mental illness during their incarceration.<sup>12</sup> CHS confirmed to Committee staff that 39% of mental health appointments were incomplete, with failure to appear due to the lack of an officer escort being the most common reason.<sup>13</sup> Although we recognize and applaud the City and DOC's significant reduction of staff absenteeism since the summer of 2021, approximately 20% of uniformed staff are still out on any given day.<sup>14</sup> This continued staff shortage means that the mental and physical health of detainees continues to be jeopardized.

As the Task Force seeks to improve the mental and physical health of detainees, it is critical that you include the perspectives of the Department of Mental Health and Hygiene, and public defender offices. We urge you to invite their representatives onto the Task Force pursuant to Section 1(c) of Executive Order 16.

We are committed to working with the Task Force to find solutions to alleviate the inhumane conditions at Rikers that endanger the health and safety of the approximately 5,500 detainees and nearly 8,000 correctional officers who work there, while also addressing public safety concerns in New York City.

For these reasons, we request that the Task Force provide a briefing for Committee staff by July 11, 2022, detailing your priorities and progress on tackling the problems at Rikers since the Task Force's inception in May, including, but not limited to, the following topics:

---

<sup>10</sup> Briefing by NYC Department of Corrections, Correctional Health Services, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, to Staff, Committee on Oversight and Reform (May 5, 2022); *Judge Faults Medical Care for Detainees in Latest Sign of Rikers Crisis*, New York Times (May 18, 2022) (online at [www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/nyregion/nyc-correction-department-rikers.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/nyregion/nyc-correction-department-rikers.html)).

<sup>11</sup> Board of Correction City of New York, *February and March 2022 Deaths in DOC Custody Report and Recommendations* (May 9, 2022) (online at [www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/Reports/BOC-Reports/deaths-report-and-chs-response-202202-202203.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/Reports/BOC-Reports/deaths-report-and-chs-response-202202-202203.pdf)).

<sup>12</sup> Briefing by NYC Department of Corrections, Correctional Health Services, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice to Staff, Committee on Oversight and Reform (May 5, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Steve J. Martin, Independent Monitor, Nunez, to Chief Judge Laura Taylor Swain, United States District Court (May 17, 2022) (online at <http://tillidgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-05-17-Letter-to-Court-re-Action-Plan.pdf>); Briefing by New York City Department of Corrections, Correctional Health Services, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, to Staff, Committee on Oversight and Reform (May 5, 2022).

Mr. Brendan McGuire

Mr. Phillip Banks

Page 4

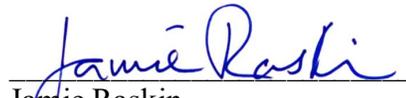
1. How the Task Force plans to implement solutions to address the conditions at Rikers, including ensuring the physical safety, health, and mental health needs of detainees and staff;
2. How the Task Force plans to receive input from the Department of Mental Health and Hygiene;
3. How the Task Force plans to receive input from public defenders' offices;
4. How the Task Force plans to allow for community participation, particularly from directly impacted communities;
5. The names and positions of the current members of the Task Force; and
6. The timeline on which the Task Force aims to complete its work.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. Thank you for your prompt consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Carolyn B. Maloney  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Jamie Raskin  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and  
Civil Liberties



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Reform

The Honorable Nancy Mace, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties