

Testimony to the Board of Corrections

July 14, 2020

By Sarita Daftary, Senior Community Organizer, JustLeadershipUSA

I'm testifying today on behalf of JustLeadershipUSA and the #CLOSErikers campaign, and as a member of the Jails Action Coalition. I would like to share a short statement from a mother, who asked that I bring her concern to this Board.

"I am writing this email on behalf of my loved one incarcerated in the City jail system. In May 2020, this detainee made an anonymous phone call to 311 Complaint Center to report that a female CO was observing the men as they showered. At the time, he was detained at the Vernon C. Bain Center in the Bronx. A week later he was called to the OIG and made to write a statement about the 311 phone call. He wrote the statement, still wondering how did they know it was he who made the initial call. A month later he was told he had to pack up his stuff and be transferred to Rikers' Island. He was transferred and given a higher classification, jumping from 14 to 21.

Detainees in the City jail system are treated like cattle, at every turn, they are subjected to demeaning tactics. They are strip searched before and after televisions. They are forced to stand outside their cells just after coming from the showers, in underwear; being told they have to wait 45 minutes until the next option."

She shared with me that she reported this incident of retaliation to 311, but never received a response. She was reluctant to share it with the Board of Corrections after that.

We appreciate the work that this Board has done, and we must honestly acknowledge that work has not been sufficient to protect the lives, dignity and human rights of incarcerated people. The reality is that much, much more must be done. It cannot wait, and it cannot be delayed by interference by an unwilling administration. This is an independent board, and you must use that independence to do what is needed and what is right with all possible urgency, because lives very much do depend on it.

On that point, I want to ask this Board, now for the third time, about what could be a fairly simple but illuminating action for the Board to take.

- When will the Board meet with Department leadership and the *Nunez* Monitor to review videos of Uses of Force by correction officers which the Monitor identifies as inappropriate, but which the Department identifies as appropriate through their internal reviews? In the January Board meeting, Dr. Cohen requested the opportunity for this joint review, and Commissioner Brann offered to bring this idea up to the Monitor, and get back to the Board (at 2:29:48).

We hope the results of this review can be reported to the public at the next Board meeting.

We have recently seen the reactions of people across the City, nation, and country to the video evidence of police aggression and escalation on streets. Incarcerated people and their loved ones know - and multiple Federal Monitor reports confirm - that those same acts of aggression, escalation, and brutality are carried out by the New York City Department of Correction on a daily basis, but in secrecy, behind bars. Yet this Department and this Board have celebrated progress in establishing video surveillance of, we are told, nearly all parts of the jails. But the accountability that should accompany that video surveillance has not happened. The Board has

a right to review that video evidence, a responsibility to incarcerated people to review those videos, and an obligation to tell the public what you have seen.

We are seeing that all over this country, electeds and government administrators are being held accountable to use their power to actively oppose systemic racism and manifestations of it. We call on this Board to find the courage to IMMEDIATELY use every tool in your power to end the Department of Corrections' reign of terror. It will require each of you to have the courage to break old patterns, because those patterns have resulted in countless trauma, injury, and loss of lives at the hands of the Department of Corrections for decades.

Thank you for your work, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to protect the lives of people in the Department's custody.

Sincerely,

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