

Testimony to board of Corrections

My name is Ashley Conrad and I'm a Community Organizer with Freedom Agenda. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My nephew is one of the 1,300 young adults living through hell on Rikers right now. He has a diagnosis of Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD) and is on the Autism Spectrum. The changes that this variance will bring will help no one, it would honestly be quite hurtful to my family and I. Instead it will continue to punish incarcerated people and their loved ones, the way this system always has. I assure you that mail variance or not, drugs will stay make their way onto Torture Island through the officers, as they mostly do.

With my nephew on Rikers Island, it is imperative for me to stay in contact with him by any means necessary, which is already something that the Department of Correction makes incredibly challenging. Mail has not only been a major lifeline in keeping my nephew's spirits up, by being able to have something handwritten, or hand drawn by his family (brothers, cousins, grandmother, etc.), it is also a way for our family to ensure he has resources he'll need to make it through frigid winters at Rikers Island and blistering summers due to the outdated and decrepit state he lives in. We send long johns, additional hats, socks, and underwear for him, and extras for other young men who may need them. Magazines, workbooks, and things of his interest are also sent to keep him busy when lack of programming continues to be an issue on the island.

Incarcerated people and their loved ones are able to emotionally connect through letters, cards, schoolwork, and artistic efforts. With visiting hours still very limited, we feel like we can touch, hug, kiss, and cry together through letters, which you can hold and read and re-read and archive, a privilege you and I take for granted each day. Handwritten mail is a way to keep people connected and vested in each other lives. Not to mention Mail is also crucial to incarcerated individuals' ability to communicate confidentially with their legal counsel, a right guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment. Mail and packages from loved ones are a way to stay connected to the world at a low cost, not an exploitive system that will probably be costly for incarcerated people and their families like everything else is price gauged on that island. Consider those commissary items cost three times what they would at a store - what will the markup cost be from the limited vendors DOC plans to work with? I urge the council to reject this variance because it is inhumane and hurtful. It will greatly impair communications between incarcerated individuals and their families and will not keep our loved ones safer in jails that continue to blame those with the least power, instead of holding their own staff accountable.

Pa'lante!
Ashley Conrad