



Dear Members of the Board of Corrections,

My name is Rabbi Margo Hughes-Robinson, and I am grateful for the opportunity to testify to this committee. I am the New York organizer at T'ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, which organizes Jewish clergy to act on the Jewish imperative to respect and protect the human rights of all people. I organize hundreds of Jewish clergy all over the city— as well as over 2300 Jewish clergy nationwide. As Jewish New Yorkers and as clergy, we seek the welfare of every resident of our city, and our commitment to human rights mandates that we pay especially close attention to the welfare of anyone under the city's care, particularly those who are experiencing incarceration. As the prominent American rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once wrote, "The community is not just an assembly of people who work together for their mutual benefit, but a metaphysical entity, an individuality: I might say, a living whole."<sup>1</sup> Those held in DOC custody are still part of that living community.

I'm very concerned to hear that the Department of Corrections is seeking to severely limit the contact that the people in their care may have with their families and communities. We are aware that people in DOC custody do not have reliable access to tablets, on which they would in theory read all of their mail under these proposed changes. In fact, DOC has ended their contract with a previous vendor, and since then many individuals in custody have not had any access to tablets for months already.

We are deeply concerned about the recent deaths from overdose that community members have experienced while incarcerated, but the DOC's proposed changes would not address the real sources of this issue. The Department of Investigation has already made clear that "the mail and visits" that people who are incarcerated in New York City receive are "not significant entry points for contraband."<sup>2</sup> Rather than addressing other oversight issues, including a lack of required body scanners for DOC staff at work, these changes would only serve to further isolate individuals from their loved ones, and place undue financial burden on their families and anyone else who would have to send any new packages through a limited list of vendors.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Community," *Tradition* XVII, 2 (Spring, 1978), p. 9

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<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/ny-rikers-contraband-louis-molina-overdoses-smugglin-g-overdoses-20220711-ohtjxkvqavffkwcuauvcwdqje-story.html>

The Board is no doubt aware that New Yorkers in DOC custody are suffering from the extreme limitation or even complete lack of access to many basic services at present; including haircuts, clean laundry, and time outdoors. What's more, DOC has still suspended weekend visits. Holding a physical piece of mail or package sent from home is one of the few tangible connections to home our correctional system currently affords the individuals in its custody. We urge you to condemn these proposed changes, and allow every New Yorker the bare minimum of connection to their families, friends, and communities. As the Talmud invokes, "*O hevruta, O mituta*."<sup>3</sup> We know that to be separated from one's community is to be cut off from life.

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<sup>3</sup> Talmud Bavli Taanit 23a