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On Eve of Adams Administration's Rikers Plan, Activists Demand Department of Justice Intervene To Confront Humanitarian Crisis at Jails

As Suffering Continues and Death Toll Rises, Group Launches Resource Hub Detailing Adams Administration Many Failures in Response to Crisis

(May 16, 2022) — With the humanitarian crisis at Rikers Island worsening by the day, [Campaign Zero](#) (CZ) today joined the calls for the jails to be placed in [Federal receivership](#) immediately until the planned closure of the facility in 2027 to prevent more death and suffering.

Supporting the case for intervention by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Campaign Zero launched [Rikers in Crisis](#), a comprehensive resource hub documenting the persistent and willful failures by Mayor Eric Adams administration in its first 135 days in office – during which time 4 detainees have died in custody and tens of thousands of detainees' medical appointments have been missed. Since 2021, a total of 20 detainees have died in custody at the facility.

"How many more people have to die at Rikers under Mayor Adams' watch before someone steps in?" demanded **Campaign Zero Executive Director DeRay Mckesson**, who was appointed to Mayor Adams transition team, serving on the Equity Committee. "Instead of solving this humanitarian crisis, Mayor Adams has made it worse by firing those who refused to do his corrupt bidding, protecting the unethical and dangerous behavior of the corrections union and making a mockery of the current monitoring process."

A research-driven, activist-led organization focused on dismantling police unions and ending police violence, Campaign Zero, along with other experts and organizations, point to Federal receivership as a demonstrated model to remedy the crisis at Rikers. A court-appointed Federal receivership would transfer authority from the City to the Federal government through a receiver, allowing them to supersede local laws and hire/fire anyone, make budgetary decisions, improve disciplinary systems, and change policies/union contracts.

Decades of bad practice, inept uniformed leadership and abuse of New York City Department of Correction (DOC) policies have created a deadly environment for both staff and detainees. For years, these conditions have worsened, and continue to worsen under the Adams administration, whose only solution is to add more people: add more officers, and add more agencies to a "task force." Adding more people will not solve the problem. Arming the right receiver with the power to change the broken system will. Without changing irresponsible sick leave policies, officers will continue to miss work, posts will remain unstaffed, and people will die from choking or overdose or suicide.

“Without the ability to completely reform uniform leadership at Rikers, rather than continuing the toxic cycle of promoting from within, there cannot be meaningful change. Without completely reforming the disciplinary system - for misconduct committed by both detainees and staff - there cannot be true accountability,” said **Sarena Townsend, a partner at Townsend, Mottola & Uris Law and former Deputy Commissioner of the NYC Department of Correction (DOC)**. Townsend, who is advising Campaign Zero, was fired by the Adams Administration after she refused to dispose of 2,000 disciplinary cases against staff – a bid pushed by the corrections union.

For a Federal receiver to be appointed, the plaintiffs in the ongoing litigation would have to petition the Court for such action. Negotiations would lead to the appointment of a receiver or a committee of receivers, determine the specific powers they would wield, and set a timeline for the termination of receivership. The receiver gets all power necessary to bring Rikers Island into compliance. They answer only to the Court and must publish their efforts and findings to ensure transparency and success. Once sustainable achievements are made, the receiver returns power to the city.

Federal intervention over Rikers has gained more support and attention in recent weeks as the conditions at the facility continue to deteriorate well into Mayor Adams tenure. The notion was specifically raised by DOJ in a recent [letter](#) to the Court overseeing the current monitoring process as it noted: “The continuing failure to follow basic security protocols, dysfunctional staff deployment practices, inexplicably high staff absenteeism levels, deficient management and supervision of frontline officers, and the failure to hold staff timely accountable for the use of excessive and unnecessary force against inmates have resulted in an unsafe environment and non-compliance ...”

The April 19th letter was sent after DOJ made several unsuccessful attempts to get specific responses from the City regarding the proposed reforms at the facility.

”Absent a commitment to expeditiously make the dramatic systemic reforms identified by the Monitor and to bring in corrections experts from outside the Department to revamp the agency’s operations and staffing practices, we will be left with no other option but to seek more aggressive relief, which could involve seeking the appointment of a receiver with independent authority to implement sweeping reforms and to take all necessary actions to comply with the Consent Judgment and Remedial Orders and implement the Monitor Recommendations,” according to the **DOJ letter**.

There have been several successful examples of federal intervention working to resolve public health and safety crises like the one at Rikers including:

- **1995:** After over 20 years of litigation and attempts at all measures short of receivership, the **District of Columbia’s medical and mental care jail system was appointed a receiver**. The Judge did not immediately appoint a receiver, but rather, ordered that the parties and the Special Officer confer and agree on an appointment within 30 days. Under a 5-year ordered receivership, operations significantly improved at a facility once beset by tuberculosis outbreaks, high suicide rates, and woeful AIDS treatment.
- **1976:** After six years of noncompliance with his orders, federal Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr was the first to order **a receiver for Alabama’s entire prison system**. The receiver had the power without limitation to hire, discharge, suspend, and supervise the Commissioner of Corrections, deputy commissioners, and any other uniformed personnel. From 1983, receivership operated

with the oversight of a five-member panel of prison experts and lawyers called the “Prison Implementation Committee.” When the prison was handed back to the state in 1989, it had shown remarkable enhancements in security, healthcare, and education.

The calls for federal intervention come on the eve of the deadline for the Adams Administration to file its plan for Rikers with the Court overseeing the Nunez consent decree.

For more information on the case for Federal receivership click [here](#).

[About Campaign Zero](#)

Campaign Zero is a data-driven organization started by activists to provide people with the information and tools they need to dismantle police unions and end police brutality. Campaign Zero encourages organizers, activists, and policymakers to focus on solutions with the strongest evidence of effectiveness at reducing police violence. For more information, please visit www.JoinCampaignZero.org.

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