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*****For Immediate Release*****

***Brooklyn Defenders Statement in Response to Reporting on Abuse of
Incarcerated New Yorkers with Mental Illness at Rikers Island***

(BROOKLYN, NY) – **Brooklyn Defender Services** released the following statement in response to a new [report](#) that the Department of Correction (“DOC”) is routinely “locking-in” and denying access to mental health treatment to New Yorkers with mental illness who are incarcerated at Rikers Island:

“Three years ago, we filed a [class action lawsuit](#) against DOC over its long and persistent failure to provide access to medical care and mental health treatment to New Yorkers incarcerated at Rikers Island. Since then, DOC’s denial of access to care has only worsened, with dangerous and deadly results. The latest accounting from a former social worker at Rikers Island contributes to a horrifying pattern of abuse that people we represent have long reported to us.

It is beyond appalling that people with mental illness are routinely locked into cells—in units that are supposedly specialized for mental health treatment— where they are isolated, denied access to essential medical care, and caused to decompensate. These ‘lock-ins’ are not documented by DOC, an abuse without a trace and in violation of city rules. We commend Ms. Rzewinski for coming forward and bringing this to light.

More than half of the people incarcerated at Rikers Island have been diagnosed with a mental illness. This new revelation highlights the cruelty and ineffectiveness of using the criminal legal system to address health and mental health concerns. The city must move away from a mental health response that criminalizes people and move towards investments and community-based responses, including the passage of the [Treatment Not Jail Act](#).

This accounting once again underscores the need for a federal receiver and to close the jails at Rikers Island. In addition, as the City plans its borough-based jails, there must be deep review to ensure that new facilities do not have the type of cells that can allow for such abuses in the future. It is critical that these physical and cultural structures of abuse are not recreated.”

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Brooklyn Defender Services is a public defense office whose mission is to provide outstanding representation and advocacy free of cost to people facing loss of freedom, family separation and other serious legal harms by the government. We believe in a client-centered approach and work, in and out of court, to uphold the rights, freedom and dignity of people threatened by unjust, racist and harmful legal systems. www.bds.org