DOZENS OF ADVOCATES, ELECTED OFFICIALS RALLY IN SUPPORT OF HUNGER STRIKERS AT RIKERS ISLAND ON THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2022

(January 13, 2022 – New York, NY) - The Fortune Society (Fortune), joined by dozens of advocates and elected officials, rallied outside of Rikers Island in support of incarcerated individuals who have launched a hunger strike in protest of conditions and food at the facility.

The rally – which took place at the entrance to Rikers Island at Hazen Street and 19th Avenue in Queens - featured remarks and/or attendance from representatives from: Jails Action Coalition, Freedom Agenda, Halt Solitary Confinement, Exodus Transitional Community, Women’s Community Justice Association, Osborne Association, A Little Piece of Light, Treatment Not Jail Coalition, New Hour, and Defender organizations including Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, New York County Defender Services, and Bronx Defenders.

Additionally, New York City Council Members Shekar Krishnan, Carmen De La Rosa, Lincoln Restler, Erik Bottcher, and Gale Brewer, former New York City Councilmember Daniel Dromm, and Solomon Acevedo of the New York City Public Advocate’s Office spoke at the rally.

“The unfolding hunger strike at the Robert N. Davoren Center (RNDC), one of eight jails on Rikers Island, is another example of why the humanitarian crisis at Rikers must be addressed immediately,” said
JoAnne Page, President and CEO of The Fortune Society. “While the surge in COVID-19 cases among people detained at Rikers may require certain measures to protect the health of staff and other detained people, timely access to medical care, regular recreation, and contact with defense attorneys and loved ones must never be denied.

The Department of Correction and the officers’ union must provide adequate staffing of all posts across Rikers to ensure safe operations and conditions. With over 50 years of experience working with people in jails and prisons and upon their reentry, the Fortune Society knows that smart, effective, and humane correctional practice does not compromise on the basics of keeping people safe and healthy. We stand with the men in RNDC who are taking this collective action out of desperation, and their loved ones.”

“New Hour continues to support women at Rosie’s who call us collect. This recent hunger strike speaks to the lack of needed reforms and will lead to more than the 16 deaths if the Mayor and those in power do not act swiftly to address the inhumane conditions at Rikers. We are calling for accountability by DOC and urge Mayor Adams to act with both compassion and leadership into address this dire crisis,” stated executive director Serena Martin-Liguori of New Hour for Women & Children,” said Serena Liguori, Executive Director, New Hour for Women and Children LI.

Roger Clark, of the #HALTsolitary Campaign and Jails Action Coalition, said: “This past year, Rikers Island saw an alarming number of deaths and people are still suffering today. We stand in solidarity with the hundreds of people in the jails who have refused food in protest of not having their most basic needs met. New York City officials must release people now and ensure that everyone still incarcerated has access to visits, medical care, law library, social engagement and programming, and the ability to go to court in person to figure out what's going on in their case. We need action immediately.”

“The inhumane treatment of women and men imprisoned at Rikers needs to stop. Speaking as someone who spent 27 years behind bars, including time there, I fully understand the why behind these hunger strikes. With COVID, the humanitarian crisis that has existed there for decades has been exacerbated beyond compare. We must ask ourselves: how many more people need to die before we see change?” said Donna Hylton, Founder of A Little Piece of Light.

“Four months ago, on September 13, we came to Rikers with elected officials and witnessed absolute horror, including an incarcerated person trying to take their own life in front of us. The situation was beyond unacceptable then, and where are we now? As public defenders, we stand in solidarity with the brave people incarcerated in RNDC, who are protesting for their basic human needs in this frigid winter and forcing us to reckon with this city's ongoing failure to protect them. Along with them, we refuse to accept the apathy of the people with power. To the judges who are setting unaffordable bail every day, you are sending people to torture. To the judges who are denying emergency release applications, you are sanctioning torture. Judges, DAs, Mayor Adams, and Governor Hochul: you must decarcerate immediately,” said Meghna Philip, Special Litigation Attorney at Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem.

“Rikers Island is a reflection of us. What we stand for. What we value. What we see as the future of criminal justice in New York City -- and it is an awful image,” said Christopher Boyle, Director of Data Research & Policy at New York County Defender Services. “But I am an optimist. We can re-imagine punishment and rehabilitation in this city, but it will take work. How do we do it? We need to decarcerate - beginning with RNDC and extending to all city jails. The city has long failed in its duty to keep incarcerated people safe, and it is time for action. It is time for the federal government to come in and start over from scratch.”
“The Bronx Defenders stands in solidarity with those who have gone on hunger strike at Rikers Island and everyone who has been subjected to the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe there,” said Justine Olderman, Executive Director of The Bronx Defenders. “Over the past months, we have witnessed the already deplorable conditions on Rikers reach unimaginable new lows. DOC has demonstrated over and over again that it cannot provide for the basic health and safety of the people trapped there. Failure to act now would be unconscionable. The only solution is immediate decarceration.”

“The Women’s Community Justice Association (WCJA) stands in proud solidarity with the incarcerated men on Rikers who have been forced to engage in a hunger strike just to access basic services that most people take for granted. Their bravery once again forces us to confront the humanitarian crisis at Rikers Island. It is more urgent than ever that we close Rikers Island and this important work can and should begin with the closure of the Rose M. Singer jail for women and gender-expansive people. It’s a disgrace that the conditions are so horrific the incarcerated feel their only recourse is a hunger strike. We hope our leaders will finally get serious about closing Rikers for good,” said Rev. Sharon White-Harrigan, the executive director of the Women’s Community Justice Association, which leads the #BEYONDRosies campaign to close the Rose M. Singer facility,” said Rev. Sharon White-Harrigan, LMSW, Executive Director of the Women’s Community Justice Association (WCJA).

Kandra Clark, VP of Policy & Strategy, said, “Exodus Transitional Community stands in solidarity with our detained/incarcerated New Yorkers who are participating in a hunger strike over a lack of basic resources. For far too long, this City has allowed our detained/incarcerated community members to languish behind bars without access to basic necessities such as food, toilet paper, law library services and overall programming, including mental health and substance use disorder treatment. All while taxpayers spend nearly a half a million dollars a year per detained/incarcerated individual. The entire City is suffering at the hands of an archaic system that is morally and fiscally burdensome on our community. A system that focuses more on inflicting trauma than helping people heal. Exodus will continue to show up in solidarity for our loved ones in City jails who are suffering. And, we will continue to call on City Officials and Judges to decarcerate and help create real and lasting change.”

“The shameful disregard of basic human and constitutional rights continuing at Rikers Island is an ongoing humanitarian crisis,” said Tina Luongo, Attorney-In-Charge of the Criminal Defense Practice at The Legal Aid Society. “At this point, people incarcerated in City jails have resorted to the extreme measure of denying themselves food to draw attention to the sickening conditions in Rikers. Decarceration is the only solution that will meaningfully address this latest crisis, and we again call on judges, District Attorneys and elected officials to take every step to free New Yorkers from local jails.”

“The ongoing horrific and inhumane caging of vulnerable human beings at Rikers Island is an embarrassment of epic proportions,” said Mark Graham Executive Director of the Redemption Center and Treatment Not Jail Coalition Member. “The overwhelming majority of incarcerated people are suffering daily because of untreated mental health conditions and a history of substance dependence. We must provide treatment and not jail for these members of our communities. It costs taxpayers $556,539 per year to incarcerate a single person in jail. That means we spend $1,525 per day to subject a human being to this unspeakable torture, which ultimately leads to more (not less) criminal legal involvement. Meanwhile, pre-trial diversion programs have been shown to significantly reduce future criminal activity of program participants.”

"We all want a system that is fair, just, and humane. 200 incarcerated people are on a hunger strike to protest unfair, unjust, and inhumane conditions on Rikers Island. We stand in solidarity with them and their demands for basic needs which should already been met. DOC must act swiftly before another life is lost,” said Darren Mack, Co-Director of Freedom Agenda.
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"I stand with the detainees who are refusing food in protest of cruel and inhumane conditions." said New York City Council Member Erik Bottcher (District 3). “It's unconscionable that we have New Yorkers detained in nineteenth century jail conditions. Our corrections officers need to end their ‘sick-out’. It is an immoral way to air grievances and is getting people hurt.”

New York City Council Member Gale Brewer (District 6) said, “One of the main jobs of an elected official, I believe, is to give voice to those who have no voice. It's also one of the main jobs of a democracy. Rikers has been a debacle under the previous administration, and I can only hope that the Adams administration can finally get their arms around the many layers of problems there.”

New York City Council Member Carmen De La Rosa (District 10) said, “Today I stand in solidarity with incarcerated people who are on hunger strike in Rikers Island as an act of defiance against a racist system that extracts Black and Brown people from our communities each day. The dark history of Rikers cannot be erased. Our only solution is to expedite the closure of Rikers Island for it cannot be fixed or reformed. We are amidst a humanitarian crisis today where incarcerated people do not have access to basic human rights: food, medical care, and legal representation. If our city is to continue to be the beacon of the American Dream, we must act immediately to end these atrocities.”

“Rikers Island is the biggest humanitarian and civil rights crisis of our city. Everyone needs to be paying attention. I join my colleagues in solidarity with the hunger strikers whose demands are for their basic human rights to be respected—medical and mental health care, recreation time, and access to their constitutionally-protected right to counsel. The way we end this crisis is by closing Rikers, ending solitary confinement, and—above all else—decarceration,” said New York City Council Member Shekar Krishnan (District 25).

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ABOUT THE FORTUNE SOCIETY: Founded in 1967, The Fortune Society has advocated on criminal justice issues for over five decades and is nationally recognized for developing model programs that help people with criminal justice histories to be assets to their communities. Fortune offers a holistic and integrated “one-stop-shopping” model of service provision. Among the services offered are discharge planning, licensed outpatient substance abuse and mental health treatment, alternatives to incarceration, HIV/AIDS services, career development and job retention, education, family services, drop in services and supportive housing as well as lifetime access to aftercare. For more information, visit www.fortunesociety.org.

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