

PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY

To: Philadelphia City Council, Committee on Public Safety
From: Noah Barth, Pennsylvania Prison Society Prison Monitoring Director
Regarding: Philadelphia City Council testimony, June 27, 2023
Resolution No. 230467
Date: June 23, 2023

Good morning Chairman Jones and Councilmembers,

My name is Noah Barth, I am the Prison Monitoring Director for the Pennsylvania Prison Society and a proud Philadelphian. Since 1787 our organization has monitored conditions inside of the Philadelphia prisons and those across the commonwealth. We are inside of the prisons on State Road multiple times per week meeting with incarcerated Philadelphians who ask for our help.

For the past two years I have led ten walkthroughs of the Philadelphia prisons¹, observing conditions, speaking with staff, and interviewing 411 detained Philadelphians across all five facilities. These walkthroughs, combined with the hundreds of detained Philadelphians we have met with, have painted a very clear picture of dysfunction, neglect, and abuse. This is the result of not only a major staffing shortage but mismanagement, a dysfunctional organizational culture, and a needless overuse of incarceration.

The recent escapes from State Road are only the most publicly visible sign of the crises at the Philadelphia prisons.

The majority of the 400+ people we have interviewed over the course of the last two years report being locked in their cells for days and weeks at a time with no access to showers, phone calls, or the barest forms of diversion or human interaction. We have shared time and again with city and state government reports of falsified recreation logs, unstaffed housing units, unattended medical emergencies, staff assaults, unchecked violence, people going hungry, unnecessarily missed court dates and legal calls, decrepit, unsafe conditions, and a litany of other troubling issues. In our walkthrough last month of Riverside Correctional Facility, 64% of people interviewed said that they don't feel safe, 72% reported the presence of rodents, and 75% said that officers do not respond to calls from in-cell buzzers. These numbers are consistent with our prior walkthroughs.

And we are not alone; a chorus of concerned individuals, organizations, and community groups have repeatedly raised alarm bells that have largely gone unheeded. Recently we have seen improvements in the commissary system and laundry delivery. While these may seem of marginal importance, they are critical to the day-to-day experience of the people in prison, and evidence that improvement is possible.

The most important stakeholder on this issue cannot be here today- the individuals incarcerated in our city's prisons. Below is a selection of quotes taken directly from our walkthrough interviews that illustrate the concerns I am raising:

"Staff are overwhelmed and overworked and as a result, we become cattle to them."
– CFCF resident in general population

"There's nothing to do all day, I'm mentally strong but I feel myself slipping."
– CFCF resident in restricted housing

¹ <https://www.prisonersociety.org/news-and-resources>



230 S. Broad Street, Suite 605
Philadelphia, PA 19102
p 215-564-4775 f 215-564-1830

[PRISONERSOCIETY.ORG](https://www.prisonersociety.org)

"I've put in medical slips for months. I have two bullets in my leg. I've got pain and they just don't respond."

– RCF resident in general population

"I'm scared."

– RCF resident in general population

The Prison Society is heartened that this hearing has been called and that the Council has solicited our input. We believe that the on-going human rights crisis in our city's prisons should be of imminent concern to all Philadelphians, as 4,500 of our neighbors continue to have their health, safety, and dignity jeopardized by the very government whose responsibility it is to protect them.

Thank you for your time today.

