

# PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY

To: Commissioner Blanche Carney  
From: Claire Shubik-Richards, Pennsylvania Prison Society Executive Director  
Regarding: RCF Walkthrough, May 18, 2023  
Date: June 7, 2023  
Copied: Philadelphia County Government Officials<sup>i</sup>  
Pennsylvania State Department of Corrections  
Prison Society Board of Directors

This memorandum summarizes the Prison Society's walkthrough of the Riverside Correctional Facility (RCF) on May 18, 2023.

The walkthrough re-enforced several of the findings that we have brought to your attention following walkthroughs of facilities within The Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP) since June, 2021<sup>ii</sup>. We also observed some examples of positive practice at RCF that were absent during our prior walkthroughs of other PDP facilities. The department and facility administration should be commended for these practices and work to replicate them at other PDP facilities.

In particular, people in RCF report:

- Being locked in cells for extended periods without staff supervision
- Lack of responses to requests for assistance
- Little access to programming, books, and activities
- No food served between 4:00pm – 8:00am
- Lack of response to sick call requests and medical emergencies
- Problems accessing clean sheets and clothing

There were improvements in some areas:

- Improvements to commissary procedures
- Improved access to law library
- Improved access to basic hygiene items and showers

## Background

The Pennsylvania Prison Society serves as Pennsylvania's independent prison monitor. The Society assists people in custody resolving issues related to their health, safety, and dignity.

On May 18, 2023, Prison Monitoring Director Noah Barth and four Prison Society volunteers<sup>iii</sup> completed a walkthrough of RCF, escorted by members of the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP).<sup>iv</sup> The walkthrough included a tour of three housing units and



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

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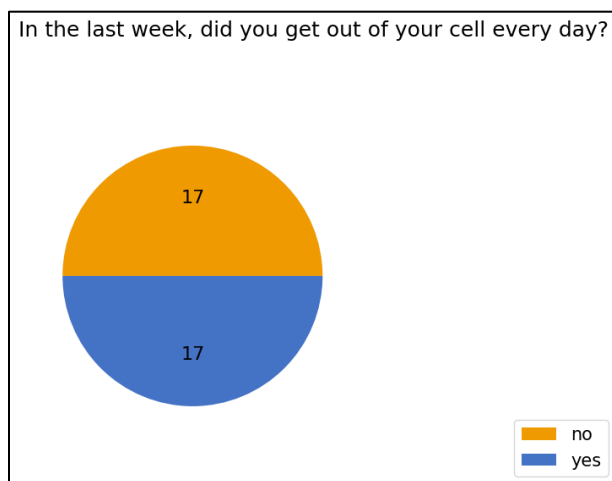
structured interviews with 39 incarcerated men. All interviews were voluntary, anonymous, and interviewees were randomly selected. In Unit A, a low security general population unit, incarcerated people were interviewed one-on-one or in small groups at day room tables. In restricted housing (RHU, aka "solitary confinement") and mental health units, interviews were conducted through cell doors.

Unit	Classification	Number of interviewees
A	Low Security general population	16
C	Restricted Housing	16
F	Mental Health treatment	7

All three of the units we entered were similarly structured with 64 cells (Units A and C) or 128 (Unit F) cells on two levels surrounding a large day room. In all three units, common use showers were situated outside of cells along the walkways. There were multipurpose rooms and recreation areas with partial outdoor exposure adjoining each day room.

The walkthrough procedure differed slightly from previous visits as representatives from the Prison Society provided immediate feedback to Warden Lacombe and Chief of Staff Vrato after each unit visited and were able to ask clarifying questions on policy and practice. Some of the PDP staff's responses are included here.

### Locked in cells for extended periods without staff supervision



One half of the people we interviewed reported that, in the last week, they had gone more or more days without being allowed out of their cell. This is a marginal improvement from our previous walkthroughs of PDP facilities. Four people interviewed stated that the last two weeks had been more challenging than usual in terms of out of cell time. They said that after the escape of two incarcerated people on May 14 from the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC)- a sperate PDP facility- the entire population had been

locked down for three days.

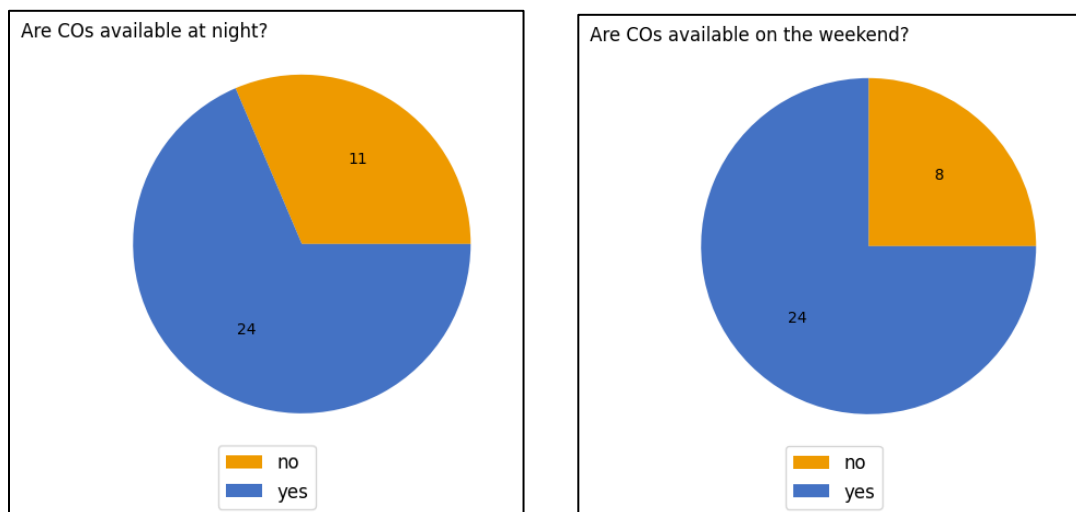


*After the escape we were locked in for four days straight.*

*We been locked down since the escape.*

In addition, four people stated that they had not been allowed out of their cells on mothers' day. PDP staff acknowledged the challenge of getting staff to work their assigned shifts during holidays. They said that gift cards were distributed to female staff who showed up on Mother's Day to show the Department's appreciation.

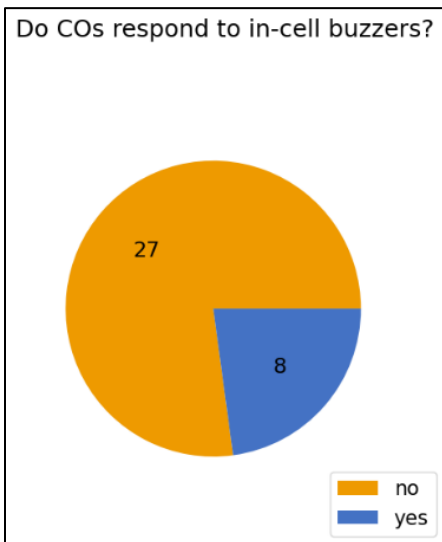
*Mother's Day? Locked down, no one came to work for 36 hours.*



The people we interviewed reported greater availability of COs at night and on weekends than reported during prior walkthroughs of PDP facilities.

*Yeah (COs are available on the weekend) but not at nighttime. About 10:30 they leave off the block; somebody could be getting stabbed in their cell and they wouldn't know. Shit is bad in here.*





The people we interviewed at RCF reported similar failings to respond to in-cell buzzers as previously reported from other PDP facilities.

*No, no, no, no! That shit out of pocket.*

*My cellie fell out the other day, bleeding all over, we called the COs with no response.*

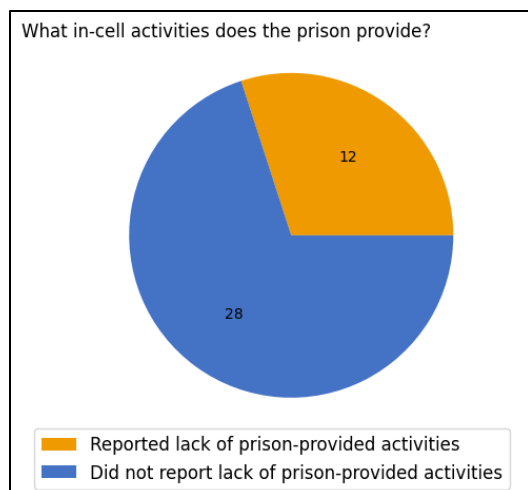
*Guards turn them off.*

*It's scary because I have a heart condition. I would have to bang on the door (if there was medical emergency).*

Prison Society representatives tested the buzzer system in two different housing units. In both cases the buzzer worked but the staff did not or were not aware of how to respond.

One person we interviewed described how a brand-new officer used the buzzer intercom to call into his cell, which surprised him. He stated that the officer had then been instructed by other staff not to use the system and he has not received an intercom message or a response to his buzzer use since then.

### Little access to programming, books, and activities; improved access to law library



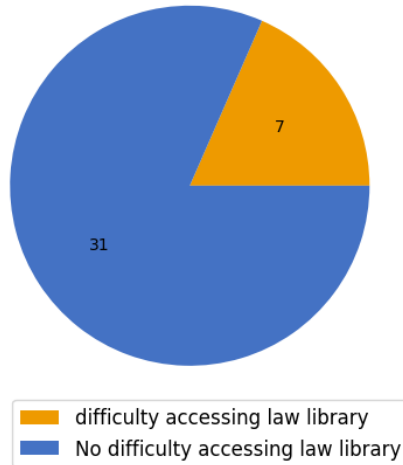
The people we spoke to reported that are not provided with any in-cell activities except for limited access to books. They also reported however that increased out of cell time has meant greater overall access to activities as rec time provides an additional outlet.

*Aside from a job I don't know (what activities there are). In-cell? No.*

*No, no activities out there either, we don't even have a basketball hoop (in the yard).*



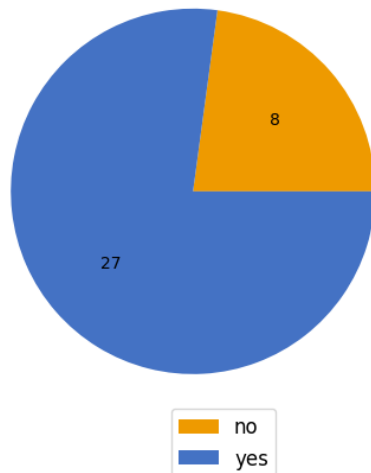
Have you tried to access the law library? If yes, were you able to?



The majority of people we interviewed said that they had access to the law library. This is an improvement from other PDP facilities visited by the Prison Society where the law library had been inaccessible.

### No food served between 4pm and 8am

Does the prison meal service provide you with enough food to eat?



Responses to our question about food service drew contradictory responses. While the majority of people said that they had received enough food, several people expressed concerns about portion size. Prison Society representatives observed lunch being delivered to units and portions sizes appeared inadequate. We observed pre-packaged, pre-cooked meals being delivered in small plastic shrink wrapped containers.

*They feed us like a third grader man!*

*No, we grown ass men, they give us kiddie trays.*

One man stated that the day after the recent escape from PICC, they were not served any hot food and were told by staff 'people broke out of jail so we gotta suffer for it.'



Other people we interviewed expressed concerns with food quality.

*There are enough calories – but it's no good. Unprepared, cold.*

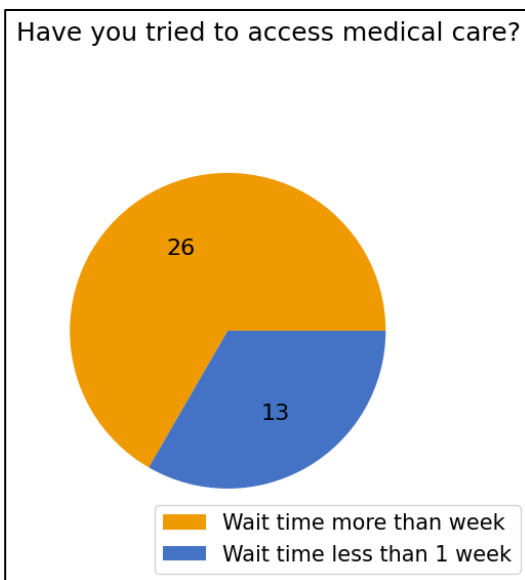
*Quality? It's terrible, absolutely terrible, it's not edible!*

Incarcerated people reported, and staff verified, that all three meals are served between 8am to 4pm. This is the same meal timing as in the Detention Center (DC). The long gap between meals results in incarcerated people relying on food purchased through commissary during the 16-hour period between 4pm and breakfast the next day. Our concern is that people without financial resources to purchase food from commissary are going hungry.

*There is no food between 3:30(pm) and 8:30(am). They are trying to starve us.*

PDP staff informed us that they would discuss the possibility of spacing meal distribution differently to address this issue.

### **Lack of response to sick call requests and medical emergencies**



Two thirds of the people we interviewed reported having to wait more than one week for a response to requests for medical care.

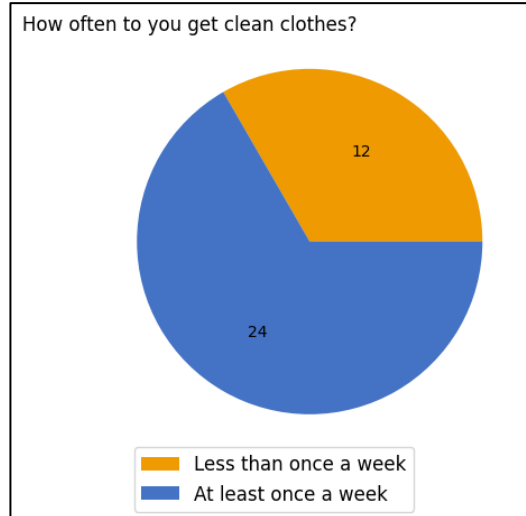
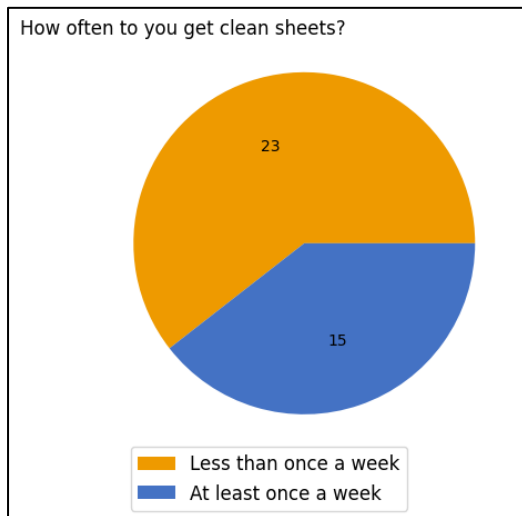
*When you fill out sick call sometimes they answer and sometimes they don't.*

*They barely answer you, good luck with medical.*

*They will disregard you and all that, say they came, you refused, all that.*



## Problems accessing clean sheets and clothing



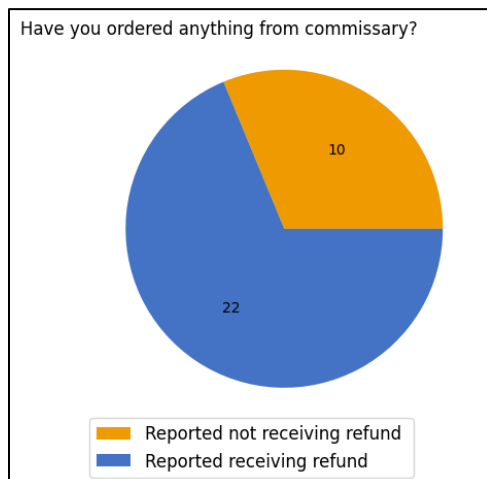
The people interviewed noted multiple issues with access to clean sheets and clean clothes.

*The lady (who does laundry) hasn't been coming over. I haven't seen her in 2-3 weeks.*

*What?! We don't get sheets anymore. I can't even remember; it's been 2-3 months.*

*None, we don't get 'em. Blues (uniforms) either, I been wearing the same pants for three months.*

## Improvements to commissary procedures



There were fewer reported issues regarding receipt of commissary items or refunds for unavailable items, than our previous walkthroughs of PDP facilities. The majority of people we spoke to said that ordered items and refunds for any out-of-stock items arrived in a timely fashion.

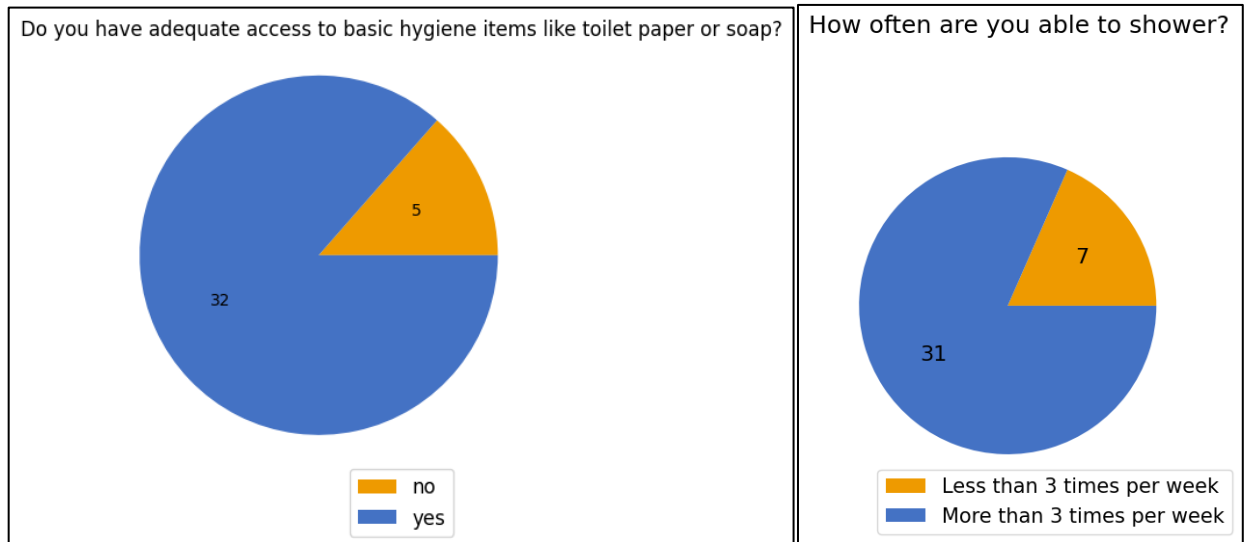
People we interviewed reported and staff confirmed that commissary prices recently increased. One man stated that two weeks before our walkthrough, the price of honey buns increased from \$0.99 to \$1.80



and the price of a bag of potato chips increased from \$1.60 to \$1.80.

The Increase in commissary pricing is compounded by a \$100 monthly limit on spending that has not increased in line with price increases. As a result, incarcerated people are not able to order as much commissary as they previously were.

### Improved access to basic hygiene items and showers



In contrast to previous walkthroughs of PDP facilities, the majority of people we interviewed said that they had regular access to showers and basic hygiene items such as soap and toilet paper. Some people we interviewed however reported problems.

*Depends on if the guard comes or not. If the guard doesn't come on the block, I might not shower for a week. Our basic hygiene depends on whether someone comes to work.*

*(to get a shower during limited rec time) You got to get in where you fit in.*

### Recommendations

Although there were some notable improvements observed during this walkthrough, the visit also reinforced findings from previous visits to PDP facilities. Many of the recommendations provided here are repeated from previous walkthrough memoranda.





### ***The need for improved management and leadership***

For close to two years the Prison Society has documented the dangerous and degrading conditions in the Philadelphia prisons. While many problems persist, there were improvements on this walkthrough, suggesting operational successes at RCF may be modeled for replication at other PDP facilities. Additionally, we observed vacant housing units at RCF and suggest that the Department consider moving incarcerated individuals from other PDP facilities into them.

In 2022, ten people in Philadelphia custody died, and countless others had their physical and mental health significantly degraded. We conducted this walkthrough and are sending this memo in an effort to help avoid the same outcome for 2023.

More than one year ago the City hired former Corrections Secretary John Wetzel to advise the City on how to end the jail crisis. While we understand that Secretary Wetzel has not written a formal report, we respectfully request that the City immediately make public Secretary Wetzel's findings and recommendations.

The ongoing crisis at the City's correctional facilities is the confluence of too few correctional staff, administrative inefficiencies resulting in people staying in jail longer than is needed, and management problems. After two years of this crisis, it is easy to become numb to this tragedy. Yet, until decisive action is taken, more people will die, be injured, be emotionally degraded, and violence in Philadelphia will continue to rise.

### ***Locked in cells for extended periods without staff supervision***

- Individuals in general housing should be permitted out of their cells and given access to the gym at least daily and for longer periods of time.
- Outdoor recreation should be made available to all people in PDP custody every day.
- Staff should be assigned and present inside each housing unit 24 hours a day.
- Senior staff should periodically make unannounced housing unit tours during different shifts to monitor if recreation time and programming is being provided.
- Staff distribution should be prioritized so that calls for help or rings from an in-cell buzzer are always responded to.

### ***Little access to programming, books, and activities***

The City of Philadelphia should provide daily activities that can be conducted while in cells such as books, puzzles, or ebooks. Approaches to consider include:

- Providing ebooks, games, and other programming on the GTL prison tablets, similar to what Allegheny County, Berks County, Delaware County, and the PA DOC have done. To



do this equitably, Philadelphia would need to purchase enough tablets to enable every resident to have a few hours with a tablet each day.

- Weekly distribution of hard-copy activity books or magazines, similar to the puzzle books the Prison Society donated to the Department of Prisons at the Prison Society's expense in 2021.

***No food served between 4pm and 8am***

- The schedule of meal preparation and delivery should be reorganized to allow for three to four hours between meals with dinner served no earlier than 6:00pm.

***Lack of response to sick call requests and medical emergencies***

- Identify and address hurdles for getting requests for medical care processed and responded to in a reasonable time.

***Problems accessing clean sheets and clothing***

- Ensure that linens and other laundry are being washed and distributed on a weekly basis as required by the inmate handbook, Section II, page 13.

***Improvements to commissary procedures***

- Increase the monthly limit on commissary spending to account for price increases.

Thank you for facilitating this walkthrough. The Prison Society is a partner in ensuring the health, safety, and dignity of Philadelphians in prison.

We would appreciate a written response to this memorandum within two weeks of receipt. Thank you for this opportunity to be of service.

We look forward to our scheduled walkthrough of CFCF in August 2023,

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<sup>i</sup> Greg Vrato, Philadelphia Department of Prisons, Chief of Staff

John Wetzel, Philadelphia Department of Prisons, Consultant

Jim Engler, Mayor's Chief of Staff

Tumar Alexander, Managing Director

Vanessa Garrett Harley, First Deputy Managing Director

Members of City Council

Office of the City Controller

Diana Cortes, City Solicitor

Larry Krasner, District Attorney

Keisha Hudson, Chief Defender

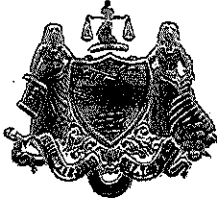
Tom Innes, Director, Prison Policy & Advocacy, Defender Association of Philadelphia



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Alexander DeSantis, Inspector General  
Idee Fox, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas  
Lisette Shirdan-Harris, Administrative Judge, Court of Common Pleas  
Joffie Pittman, Supervising Judge, Municipal Court  
Lucretia Clemons, Supervising Judge of Criminal Trials  
Patrick Dugan President Judge, Municipal Court  
Philadelphia Prison Advisory Board  
Office of Governor Shapiro  
Philadelphia members of the Pennsylvania Legislature  
Michelle A. Henry, Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General  
Ilana Eisenstein DLA Piper  
Thomas Greishaw, PA DOC  
<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.prisonsociety.org/news-and-resources>  
<sup>iii</sup> Andrea Striepen, Yvonne Newkirk, Aidan King, John Knapich  
<sup>iv</sup> Chief of Staff Vrato, Warden LaCombe





**CITY OF PHILADELPHIA**  
**DEPARTMENT OF PRISONS**  
**OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER**

**7901 State Road**

**Philadelphia, PA 19136**

**(215) 685-8201**

**FAX (215) 685-8577**

**E-Mail: [blanche.carney@prisons.phila.gov](mailto:blanche.carney@prisons.phila.gov)**

**Website: [www.phila.gov/departments/prisons](http://www.phila.gov/departments/prisons)**

**Blanche Carney, MSS, CCM**  
**Commissioner**

**July 7, 2023**

**Claire Shubik-Richards**  
**Executive Director**  
**Pennsylvania Prison Society**  
**230 S. Broad St., Suite 605**  
**Philadelphia, PA 19102**

**Dear Ms. Shubik-Richards,**

I am writing in response to your June 7, 2023, memorandum concerning the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP). Your letter is based on the tour of the Riverside Correctional Facility (RCF) on May 18, 2023, conducted by Prison Monitoring Director Noah Barth and four (4) Pa Prison Society Volunteers.

First, I'm pleased to see your acknowledgment regarding the positive observations that you made. Specifically, you acknowledged improvements to commissary procedures, access to law library and access to basic hygiene items and showers. We continuously work towards optimal conditions and services for our incarcerated population. I will address your concerns raised in turn below.

Your first concern is that "half of the people we interviewed reported going more than a day without being allowed out of their cell." At the time of your visit, we had just experienced the recent escape at PICC, which necessitated a department wide, temporary restriction on time out of cell. However, we resumed normal operations since that time. The incarcerated population at RCF receives five (5) hours of daily out of cell time on a consistent basis.

Your next concern is that there is a lack of response to requests for assistance. I understand your need to maintain confidentiality, but we would need the names of the specific incarcerated people stating this in order to address the allegation. Indeed, as you acknowledge, your volunteers requested random testing of the emergency call buzzers on the respective housing units visited and all buzzers tested were working.

Regarding medical services, Incarcerated Person (IP) sick call requests are placed in clearly marked Sick Call boxes on each housing unit. These boxes are emptied every day by medical

personnel. Our research demonstrated that our medical provider is timely scheduling our incarcerated individuals accordingly. If there are any individuals that you believe are not being seen in a timely manner, please confidentially provide me their name and police photo (PP) # and I will ensure that they are promptly seen by our medical provider.

Regarding complaints about food quality, the City's food service provider prepares meals based on the nutrition standards of the 2020-2025 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which includes recommended daily caloric intakes. Of course, we strive to ensure that meals are always served on schedule and continue to evaluate ways that we can enhance the meals provided to the RCF population and throughout PDP's facilities in accordance with healthy food standards. Additionally, our food services are in alignment with the City's Get Healthy Philly guidelines.

You also raised the issue of too much time passing between dinner (4 PM) and breakfast the next morning (8 AM). We looked into this issue and dinner will now be served at 5 PM, with breakfast being served at 6 AM.

You state that several incarcerated individuals complained regarding access to clean sheets and clothing. RCF has a weekly clothing exchange schedule with a consistently assigned Officer to facilitate this task. Research into this issue revealed no deviation from this schedule regarding incarcerated individuals receiving clean sheets and clothing. There is also a working washer and dryer on all housing units with available detergent. We checked and confirmed that all washers and dryers are indeed working and ample detergent is available on each housing unit. This should not be an issue. Again, while understanding the need for confidentiality, please confidentially provide me the name and PP # of any incarcerated person who raised this issue and it will allow me to specifically address their concern.

Lastly, you state that there is little access to programming, books and activities. First, you do acknowledge that the incarcerated people your representatives spoke to stated that "increased out of cell time has meant greater overall access to activities as rec time provides an additional outlet." The incarcerated individuals spoken to also acknowledged "limited access to books" to read in their cells. Indeed, RCF has a library from which any IP can request a book. To ensure that the RCF population knows how to gain this access, the RCF Warden has placed literature on every housing unit explaining how to gain access to the books in the RCF library.

Regarding access to reading and writing materials, individuals housed in RCF—and all of our facilities--have access to word search puzzles and educational tablets. We appreciate your ongoing feedback and recommendations regarding this subject and we are continuing to explore additional options to improve in this area as well. Of note, our goal is to ultimately be able to provide tablets for the entire population, which would include additional educational programming and activities. However, it will take time to accomplish this process.

As you know, we are under federal court monitoring pursuant to the Remick litigation. The issues you raise are addressed in the federal monitoring reports, which are posted on our Prisons webpage to ensure access to stakeholders and citizens. We continue to work diligently to address these issues which continue to challenge corrections.

Again, I appreciate your acknowledgments regarding the positive feedback that your Prison Society representatives received from the RCF population, as well as the direct observations of the representatives who toured. I reiterate our commitment to continue to improve our operations at all facilities. We will continue to strive to optimize clean, healthy, and safe conditions for our incarcerated population while ensuring that they receive proper time out of their cells with access to services and activities. We also appreciate you identifying issues in PDP facilities and again request that you share any specific details to assist with our investigations into allegations you report. I will ensure that all aspects of our operations and services are continuously reviewed and monitored.

Regarding Mr. Wetzel's report, it remains in progress and the City will release it upon completion.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Blanche Carney', is written over the printed name.

Blanche Carney, MSS  
Commissioner

cc: John Wetzel, Consultant  
Tumar Alexander, Managing Director  
Christina Hernandez, Mayor's Chief of Staff  
Members of City Council  
Diana Cortez, City Solicitor  
Keisha Hudson, Chief Defender  
Larry Krasner, District Attorney  
Alexander DeSantis, Inspector General  
Idee Fox, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas  
Lisette Shirdan-Harris, Administrative Judge, Court of Common Pleas  
Joffie Pittman, Supervising Judge, Municipal Court  
Lucretia Clemons, Supervising Judge of Criminal Trials  
Patrick Dugan, President Judge, Municipal Court  
Philadelphia Prison Advisory Board  
Office of Governor Josh Shapiro  
Philadelphia Members of the Pennsylvania Legislature  
Thomas Greishaw, PA DOC