

Rikers staff sick call spike spurs lockdown, trapping mentally ill in cells

By **Reuven Blau**
THE CITY

This article was originally published on May 6 by THE CITY

For the first time in years, city jail officials put a Rikers Island facility housing seriously mental ill detainees on lockdown because there were not enough available officers on Sunday, THE CITY has learned.

Some 1,200 correction officers called out sick that day and another 700 or so were on medically restricted duty for various health reasons, Correction Department records show. That forced some officers to work triple or quadruple shifts.

By contrast, an average of 500 officers were out sick with around 300 on limited duty on any given day in 2019.

The union representing frontline jail officers fears more lockdowns due to staff shortages are on the horizon.

"We are holding our breath for Mother's Day this Sunday," said Michael Skelly, a spokesperson for the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association.

The lack of available officers forced top jail officials to put the entire Anna M. Kross Center facility on lockdown from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Sunday, internal records reveal.

The 1,901 detainees in the Rikers lockup, including many with mental health issues, were required to stay in their cells, without recreation time.

The Kross Center is where the department keeps most of its mental observation units as well as the Clinical Alternative to Punitive to Segregation unit. That's the area where people with mental illness are placed instead of solitary confinement when jail officers say they act out.

"There are always issues with how the jails operate," said Kayla Simpson, staff attorney with the Prisoners' Rights Project at Legal Aid. "But we are hearing a particular level of desperation from people in custody right now."

'Unlimited' Sick Time

Clients behind bars say that there are sometimes not enough officers to escort them to medical clinics for appointments or to court video conferences, Simpson said. Food and medication deliveries are late or totally missed and mail takes days to be distributed, she added.

"People are reliant on department staff for every basic need that they have," she added. "And so when there are staffing problems those disruptions are very serious."

Peter Thorne, the Correction Department's top spokesperson, said the Kross Center was not placed on a "facility-wide" lockdown. But he de-



The Anna M. Kross Center on Rikers Island.

Courtesy of the Department of Correction

clined to detail which areas in the facility were closed off.

"We're grateful for the dedication and commitment of our staff each and every day, and the safety of all of those in our facilities remains our first priority," he said.

One former top jail official could not remember the last time the department locked down a facility due to lack of staff — save for weather-related crises.

"It certainly hasn't happened in my memory," said Mark Cranston, former acting Correction Department commissioner at the start of the de Blasio administration.

The department has locked down jails 11 other times over the past year because of snow or other bad weather. Many officers are single parents and must stay home when school is canceled or have a hard time getting to Rikers when public transportation is suspended.

Jail supervisors and union officials say a big reason the number of officers out sick is currently so high is because of low morale 14 months into the pandemic.

City correction officers have so-called "unlimited sick," meaning they can take as much paid time off as medically necessary.

But some officers who might normally come to work even if feeling a little under the weather are now just staying home, said Joe Russo, president of the Assistant Deputy Wardens / Deputy Wardens Association.

"People don't want to come to work," he said. "Management preys on staff. The safest thing to

do is not get involved or not come to work."

Steve Martin, a federal monitor overseeing the department, has frequently criticized the department's disciplinary system. His reports have noted that it often takes months for investigations into allegations of abuse — and some cases are never completed before an 18 month statute of limitations.

But jail unions say the changes have put too much pressure on officers who sometimes have to make split second decisions.

"Staff does not feel supported by the management and management has no ability to motivate staff to come to work," Cranston said.

'Point of Exhaustion'

The Correction Department has approximately 8,100 officers who are used to staff three shifts daily at city jails.

COBA has repeatedly complained that some officers have been forced to work triple and quadruple shifts because there are no officers to replace them.

On Sunday, 40 officers worked triple shifts — putting them on duty for close to 24-hours straight, according to the union. Another nine stayed at their posts for part of a quadruple shift, the union said.

"They are driven to the point of exhaustion," Skelly said. "We have officers telling us they are sleeping in their cars on Rikers with pillows and sheets because they are too tired to drive home."

The union is lobbying state lawmakers to pass

a measure banning triple shifts, he added.

In April 2020, de Blasio told reporters that it was "a horrible mistake" to make officers work triple shifts and promised to end the practice.

The city vowed last month to hire an additional 400 officers, although no date is scheduled for the new class of recruits to begin.

Inmate advocates contend that there's no need for new officers. They point out the inmate population is at approximately 5,619 — less than half the number of from when de Blasio took office in 2014.

"This agency already enjoys an incredibly high ratio of staff to people in custody as compared to other jurisdictions," Simpson said. "This is fundamentally about persistent management of staff and how they are assigned."

Advocates are also worried more officers would lead to further violence.

"Our experience has shown that more officers will only mean more abuse," said Kandra Clark, vice president of policy and strategy at Exodus Transitional Community.

Cranston blamed top leadership for what he called a staffing "crisis."

"When Mayor de Blasio came in he couldn't point to the previous administration fast enough and how he was left a bad system," he said. "And in his eight years, he has made the system fundamentally inoperable."

THE CITY is an independent, nonprofit news outlet dedicated to hard-hitting reporting that serves the people of New York

Opinion: Jimmy Van Bramer is Bad for New York and for Queens

By **Joseph Geiger**
Special to the Eagle

The Coronavirus upended our entire lives, killed over 30,000 New Yorkers, and pushed our city and state finances to the brink. We were perilously close to devastating layoffs, education cuts, and a recession from which we might never have recovered. It reinforced that in times of crisis, we need elected officials who know how to lead, have the backbone to make tough decisions, and will always put New York City ahead of their own political career. The past year reinforced why it's so important for organized labor to stop politicians who oppose life-changing jobs for their constituents and who rob New York of billions of dollars in revenue. So, for the first time in our history, the New York City District Council of Carpenters voted to oppose a candidate — Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer, as he tries to become Queens Borough President

Van Bramer played a starring role in chasing away the new Amazon headquarters, which would have been \$27.5 billion in tax revenue for the state and the city and 5,000 construction jobs for New York City residents, even though he had supported Amazon coming to New York previously. Van Bramer's cowardly reversal killed the deal. With the Amazon deal, we could have built more schools in the area, improved infrastructure, and created jobs for underserved local communi-



Joseph Geiger is the executive secretary treasurer at the New York City & Vicinity District Council of Carpenters.

Photo courtesy of Geiger

ties. That funding could have unleashed a golden age of construction for affordable housing, providing homes for homeless families in New York while making long overdue repairs in NYCHA.

Instead, we have nothing. Had the federal government failed to deliver billions of dollars in state and local aid, the consequences of losing Amazon would have been catastrophic.

What is less known about Van Bramer, is his outright hostility to supporting working men and women. When the carpenter's union discovered a contracting company notorious for wage theft was undercutting workers' paychecks at the 5 Pointz Project in Long Island City, Van Bramer was silent. We asked Van Bramer for his support and he refused to speak out, choosing his donors over exploited workers. I wish I could say I was surprised, but that's who Van Bramer has always been. This is a man who collected and held onto thousands of campaign contributions from unscrupulous real estate developers despite a pledge to refuse them. He doesn't care about consistency or his constituents, just his own career. The Carpenters, as well as the people of New York, do not need a corrupt politician in office.

We are fed up with politicians who promise to build a more inclusive economy, but cave to their donors when it comes time to do the hard work to make New York City a place where everyone can live in dignity. Jimmy Van Bramer isn't going to solve any of our problems as Queens Borough President because he is the problem. His record is anti-labor, anti-jobs, and anti-Queens — and we're going to make sure every voter knows it.

Joseph Geiger is the executive secretary treasurer at the New York City & Vicinity District Council of Carpenters.