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
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. 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 completed a walkthrough of RCF, escorted by members of the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP). The walkthrough included a tour of three housing units and...
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Low Security general population</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Restricted Housing</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mental Health treatment</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 one 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 separate 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).*
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

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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you have adequate access to basic hygiene items like toilet paper or soap?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often are you able to shower?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less than 3 times per week</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>31</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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,

---

1 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