



FACT SHEET

APPOINTING A FEDERAL RECEIVER AT RIKERS

New Yorkers are deeply concerned about the ongoing crisis on Rikers Island. The conditions at New York City's massive jail complex are horrific and life-threatening for human beings – the people incarcerated and those who work there.¹ Violence is rampant.² Racism and other types of bias are deeply entrenched.³ Though Black and Latinx people constitute about half of the city's population, they represent roughly 90 percent of jail admissions.⁴ Rikers must be shut down.

For years, community groups and advocates have worked to reduce the city's jail populations and shut down Rikers. That work continues. Now, as the crisis worsens and the death toll rises, the federal courts are becoming more deeply involved and could order an independent receiver to take control of Rikers.

This fact sheet provides information about what a federal receiver is and does, and how having a receiver could be an important step in the fight to improve conditions for people who are detained at Rikers. People and families directly impacted by Rikers, along with community and advocacy groups, know that the jail complex must be shut down – and until then, we must do everything we can to improve the conditions for people who are detained there and who work there. That is why a growing number of community groups and city, state, and federal officials are calling for a federal receiver to take over at Rikers.

WHAT IS A FEDERAL RECEIVER?

As the Brennan Center for Justice describes, “When a local or state government proves unable or unwilling to improve a distressed public institution that has long defied federal law, a federal court can take the troubled entity out of the government's hands and appoint a ‘receiver’ – a nonpartisan expert – to assume direct control, with an eye towards reform.”⁵ A federal receiver is not a panacea but could cut through the red tape and political obstacles that contribute to the ongoing cycle of chaos at Rikers and improve conditions for people incarcerated and employed there.

HOW HAVE FEDERAL COURTS BEEN INVOLVED AT RIKERS AND WHAT IS THE PATH TO RECEIVERSHIP?

On August 18, 2011, the Legal Aid Society filed a lawsuit in federal court on behalf of incarcerated young people who had experienced terrible violence at Rikers, in a case known as *Nunez and United States v. City of New York*.⁶ In January 2012, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York (SDNY) started an investigation into the dire conditions on Rikers Island under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act. By December 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice joined the Legal Aid lawsuit against the DOC.⁷

On October 21, 2015, the parties agreed to a consent settlement, with the DOC responsible for prohibiting certain types of force, reporting all incidents in which staff used force on an incarcerated person, installing thousands of wall-mounted cameras, no longer placing people under age 18 in any punitive isolation, and more.⁸ U.S. District Court Judge Laura Taylor Swain also appointed corrections consultant Steve Martin as a federal monitor with the role of visiting Rikers, assessing conditions, and writing reports every four months on the progress of the consent agreement.

THE FIGHT TO CLOSE RIKERS CONTINUES AS WE CALL FOR A FEDERAL RECEIVER IMMEDIATELY.

For years, the federal monitor has filed reports documenting the outrageous levels of violence and dysfunction at Rikers, but without pressing for the next step of real federal intervention to change the situation there.⁹ Under Mayor Eric Adams, the violence on Rikers Island has been out of control. The levels of violence are so egregious that in April 2023, federal prosecutors from the SDNY wrote, “**The jails continue to be plagued by an extremely high level of violence and disorder. Incarcerated people and corrections staff continue to face an imminent risk of harm on a daily basis.**”¹⁰ At least 26 people have died in the city’s jail system since Adams took office in 2022.¹¹

People impacted by Rikers, community organizations, and advocates have worked to close Rikers and hold Adams accountable while demanding federal action. Katal and allied groups have organized, held rallies outside the federal courts and protests at City Hall, confronted Mayor Adams repeatedly to demand that he close Rikers, and issued multiple statements demanding that the mayor, city council, and federal courts take action.

After years of foot-dragging by the courts, in June 2023 – during an emergency conference on the crisis at Rikers – Judge Swain finally opened the door for the appointment of a federal receiver, stating that her confidence in city leadership “has been shaken by the incidents of the past few weeks.”¹² At the next federal court hearing on August 10, Judge Swain will allow the U.S. Attorney General’s office and Legal Aid to make their cases for a federal receivership.¹³

“WE CANNOT WAIT ANY LONGER FOR . . . PROGRESS TO MATERIALIZE.”

Over the past year, support for a federal receiver has grown dramatically. Elected leaders including the city’s Public Advocate Jumaane Williams and Comptroller Brad Lander have called for a receiver, along with more than a dozen city council members and nearly 10 state legislators. In June, Williams, working with community groups, introduced city council Resolution 669, which calls for federal receivership.¹⁴ On July 17, Damian Williams, the U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, also called for a federal receiver, describing the situation at Rikers as “a collective failure with deep roots” and saying, “We cannot wait any longer for substantial progress to materialize.”¹⁵

Mayor Adams must close Rikers. Until that happens, the federal courts must appoint a receiver who can help save lives and mitigate the growing crisis. We demand that the New York City Council take urgent action and pass [Resolution 669](#).

**CLOSE
RIKERS
NOW**

**TAKE ACTION TO CONTACT YOUR
CITY COUNCIL MEMBER AT
[KATAL.INFO/RECEIVER](https://katal.info/receiver)**

For more information and to get involved, please contact:
Melanie Dominguez, Lead Organizer
Melanie@katalcenter.org or 516-588-0127.

July 2023



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www.katalcenter.org

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