

Joint Statement by Former Interim BOC Chair Jacqueline Sherman and
Incoming Chair Jennifer Jones Austin

As the City responds to this unprecedented health crisis, the Board believes strongly that the public deserves insight into how Coronavirus is presenting and being addressed in our city jails. Jails may not be as visible as other public institutions, but what happens in them has profound impact on many New Yorkers, including people in custody, their families, and the people who work in the jails. The Board extends its appreciation to the dedicated Department of Correction (DOC) and Correctional Health Services (CHS) staff who are working tirelessly to keep everyone safe and healthy during this challenging period.

At the Board's request, the DOC and CHS have begun providing key data related to the prevalence and public health response to the novel coronavirus inside the city jails. In providing this data to the public, the Board aims to bring greater transparency to the City's efforts to protect the health of everyone in the jails – those who are detained and those who work there – as well as their families.

In addition to this critical public reporting, the Board is also closely monitoring the policies and procedures that DOC and CHS have developed as they address this public health crisis. CHS is now screening patients at pre-arraignment and upon admission to the NYC jail system to identify health issues and to recognize, isolate and monitor, as appropriate, individuals who may present symptoms or be at high risk of COVID19. DOC has also created a dedicated intake in the Manhattan Detention Center for individuals with no symptoms to ensure they can be monitored and housed appropriately as they enter the jail system. If clinically indicated, all patients are placed in special housing units for monitoring or isolation for a variety of reasons, including the possibility of COVID19 infection. DOC has also reopened the Eric M. Taylor Center for new intakes showing symptoms, as well as to expand capacity for housing and separation of people who have tested positive for COVID-19. To ensure the presence of soaps, disinfectants, working sinks, and other sanitizing materials, DOC regularly audits housing units to ensure these items are present, and then provides the audits to the Board on a daily basis.

The Board also commends the actions taken by the City, the District Attorneys and New York State for taking action to release approximately 900 people from custody over the past two weeks, as a part of an important effort to return as many people as possible and appropriate under the circumstances to their communities, and to reduce the population in the jails to allow for improved separation.

The Board will continue to monitor and report on the response to this crisis to provide necessary information to the public, and continues to encourage DOC and CHS to increase their public communications as they carry out this important work.