

Dear Members of the Board of Corrections:

My name is Cassandra Casey Deas and I am 56 years old. I was last on Rikers in 2005. Based on my experiences there, I think that the minimum standards on Rikers should be made stronger and not weaker.

Overcrowding

When I was in Rikers, I was in the dorms since I was sentenced. There were 90 women there. We were double-bunked. I couldn't sleep because there were 89 other women in the same room. There was tons of noise. It was constant. The beds were so close to each other—next to me and on top of me.

There was not enough space. There was fighting—constant arguments and confrontation. There was a lack of privacy. If they reduce the space, it will be a volatile situation if they don't also increase the number of guards. It is a set-up. Usually a CO won't come into the dorm anyway when there is fighting because there are only two of them. Then they have to call in the emergency response squad. By the time the squad gets there, everyone is fighting. I never felt safe. There were just too many women in the dorm. I was surrounded.

Infrastructure—Ventilation & Vermin

Rose M. Singer is a mess. The windows don't work. They don't close all the way in the winter and in the summer, you can't open them any more. There are leaks. There is mold. There are roaches, rats, gnats, flies and waterbugs, in the shower area and the dorms. The house gang [inmates who cleaned] got just one bottle of disinfectant. They had to water it down to make it last. There were very limited supplies.

Close Custody

I was in 23-hour confinement before. It was cold. The window was broken. You feel like you lost your sanity.

Smoking

They cut you off cold turkey and don't give you any lozenges, the patch, nothing. If they weaned people off of cigarettes, there would be less tension.

Recreation

If you aren't up and ready at 7 am for recreation, you don't get recreation and you stay in the dorm. They should change the recreation times so that people won't sleep through it. That's what I did.

Food/Hunger

Breakfast is at 4 am; lunch is at 10 or 11 am; and dinner is at 3 pm. That is 12 hours without food between dinner and breakfast. People sold their telephone time for commissary because they were hungry. They should change the mealtimes so that people aren't hungry all the time.

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Law Library

You have one day per week to go and one hour in that day, between meals and everything else. Because of the inconvenience, most women don't go to the law library.

Clothing

If you aren't guilty, they shouldn't take your personal clothes away. You are still innocent before you are convicted of anything. Putting me in my personal clothes will give me hope. Otherwise [if women are made to wear institutional clothing] we will feel like there is no hope. Maybe there is fighting over sneakers for the men, but women won't beat each other up.

Hygiene

There were insufficient supplies. When you come in, they give you a cup with supplies. If they are out of toothbrushes, you don't get one. We never got deodorant, combs, brushes, grease for our hair or towels—you had to use your sheets.

Translators

There was a problem with interpreters. Some of us who were knowledgeable about the law tried to help other prisoners understand their rights. But there were not enough translators to go around.

COs

The COs were very disrespectful. They called us "bitches," "crackheads" and "ho's". They were violent too. I saw COs hit women.

Visitors

I never had any visitors because I didn't want any. They treat your visitors like they are criminals.

Mental Health Issues

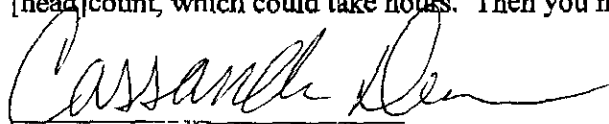
I was never asked if I had a mental health issue. I should have never been put in the dorm because of my depression and anxiety. I had constant fear for my life and my mental illness made it twenty times worse. They should have different dorms for people like me.

Drug Issues

I was detoxing from Methadone when I was home. But because of stress, I needed the Methadone while I was inside and it was denied to me. They should allow Methadone inside even if you were off it when you were on the streets.

Medical Issues

If your house is called last, you may never make it to sick call. And sometimes, even when I was sick, I didn't go to sick call because I didn't want to be stuck in a [head]count, which could take hours. Then you might not eat.



Cassandra Deas

(Interview conducted by Rebecca Brown)