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Congress of the United States
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**SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSTITUTION
AND LIMITED GOVERNMENT**

October 3, 2023

Jennifer Clemons-Abdullah
Commissioner of Corrections
St. Louis, MO

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dear Commissioner Clemons-Abdullah,

Thank you for facilitating the opportunity for me, my staff, President Green, and her staff to visit the St. Louis City Justice Center (CJC) on September 8, 2023. I appreciated the chance to see the facility after my prior visit in April 2021, and to hear directly from correctional officers and people currently in custody at the jail.

After my September visit to CJC, I was deeply troubled by the apparent and continuing issues regarding conditions at the facility and the treatment of detainees and staff. These grave concerns have only been amplified in light of the most recent death of a CJC detainee over the weekend, marking the third death within ten weeks, and tenth overall in the last two years. This letter outlines several of these issues, which must be a top priority for you and other City officials. This situation is a crisis and it is imperative you respond with the urgency it merits.

Concerns Regarding Delivery of Timely and Adequate Medical Care

First, as you know, there are significant problems with the provision of healthcare services to detainees at CJC. This is not a matter that is unique to CJC, but a systemic issue overall in the carceral system. Many of those in custody are aging and have chronic and acute conditions, substance use and mental health disorders, and our carceral systems are often ill-equipped to deal with complex medical needs. However, there is an obligation to ensure that every person in the custody of a corrections facility receives the utmost level of care.

In my experience as a healthcare provider, Corizon has never operated as an effective or responsible steward of the health and wellness of people in carceral settings. I understand the City is terminating its contract with Corizon, but replacing this company with another private

actor will not automatically solve systemic issues at CJC. For example, my staff and I heard directly from numerous detainees at CJC that they are not receiving their prescribed medication for diabetes, seizures, mental health disorders, and other chronic conditions. This is a disturbing allegation, given the longstanding trend of correctional staff accusing detainees of malingering and faking symptoms of mental health disorders, and arbitrarily refusing to provide proper treatment. We have also received direct communication from CJC staff that corroborates the claims of denial of medical care, and I am deeply concerned by the substance of these admissions.

I request all policies and procedures relating to the provision of health care services, including the process by which detainees' requests for medical care are evaluated. Further, the City must work to identify and select a non-profit entity as the successor to Corizon as soon as possible, be transparent about the provisions of the new contract, establish and/or publish publicly available and clear standards of care, and prioritize the provision of medical services to detainees at CJC.

Concerns Regarding Equal Access to Basic Needs and Services

I am also very concerned about the arbitrary denial of basic needs and services to detainees at CJC. For example, my staff and I heard concerns from detainees about being denied regular access to their attorneys, not receiving clean laundry and bedding, not receiving a response from staff after raising concerns about conditions, and not being provided with regular opportunities for recreation or the opportunity to speak with family members and other loved ones. I consider these allegations to be extremely serious, in particular because most of the detainees at CJC are in pre-trial detention, yet to be convicted of any offenses, and require regular access to their attorneys for ongoing legal matters. I urge you to investigate and provide my Office with information about how correctional staff will adequately ensure consistent and equal access to basic needs and services.

Concerns Regarding Use of Solitary Confinement as Punishment

I also have concerns about the policies and practices around solitary confinement at CJC. My staff and I heard from numerous individuals who alleged that isolation is used as a punitive tactic at CJC, and detainees are left in solitary confinement for days, weeks and months without any stated reason. As I hope you are aware, prolonged solitary confinement is a form of torture and has no place in a humane society. It can lead to self-mutilation, suicide, heart disease, anxiety, depression, psychosis, mental and physical deterioration, and a significantly heightened risk of death. Rather than improving safety, solitary confinement perpetuates cycles of trauma and makes everyone less safe. That's why I recently introduced the End Solitary Confinement Act, which would ban solitary in federal carceral facilities and incentivize states and

municipalities to adopt similar practices. While there may be rare, *extreme* situations that warrant a very limited use of segregation under current operations, I do not believe the current practices at CJC reflect such limited use. I therefore request you to provide me with a copy of your policies and procedures relating to segregation, isolation, solitary confinement, or the equivalent, and urge you to investigate the overuse of isolation at CJC and provide a public report of the findings. I also believe the City must develop a plan for ending the use of punitive, prolonged solitary confinement once and for all.

Concerns Regarding Use of Force

During our visit, you spoke repeatedly about limitations on the use of force by correctional staff. However, I have been appalled by the reports regarding the use of force at CJC, specifically the use of chemical agents on detainees. As I mentioned directly to you during my visit, I strongly oppose the use of chemical agents. As my staff and I asked during the visit, we request that you provide my Office with all policies and procedures relating to the use of force and specifically the procurement and use of chemical agents on incarcerated people. You also spoke repeatedly about de-escalation and training for correctional officers; I request policies, procedures, and other documents related to which persons or entities are responsible for providing this training, their qualifications for doing so, and the frequency and attendance rates for this training. I also request an inventory of the chemical agents on hand in the facility for use on detainees, and information about who is currently authorized to use them, on whom, and under what circumstances.

Concerns Regarding the Physical Safety of Corrections Staff and People in Custody

During our visit, you stated that “nobody ever asks about our staff.” I want to be very clear that I consider the health, safety and well-being of *everyone* in CJC to be a paramount priority. But when carceral institutions fail to ensure the safety and security of people in custody, they are doing the same for the staff who work at those institutions. Based on communications that my Office has received, I have very serious concerns about whether staff at CJC who raise concerns about their workplace conditions face retaliation. I request you provide my Office with any policies or procedures related to the administration of complaints, grievances, or the equivalent by correctional staff and detainees.

As a member of the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary, I sit on the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and issues of community safety are of utmost importance to me. Every person in our community, whether they are incarcerated or not, deserves to be treated with dignity and respect and have their basic human rights upheld. In order for all of our rights to mean anything, we must protect them for everyone—and we must vigorously work to ensure the safety and well-being of all people in our community.

Unfortunately, the tragic deaths at the facility and these other pressing issues have generated significant public distrust in CJC leadership. This is a matter of urgent priority and I strongly request that you initiate an immediate shift in the culture, policies, and practices of the CJC to ensure that the rights of staff and detainees alike are upheld. I also request that you promptly provide my Office with a response and the information requested in this letter, no later than November 3, 2023.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my Office (202-225-2406) with any questions. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you. Our St. Louis community deserves transparency.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cori Bush". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cori Bush
Member of Congress

Cc: Mayor Tishaura Jones
President of the Board of Alders Megan Green