Monday, April 20th, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio  
Mayor of New York City  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007

Director Elizabeth Glazer  
Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice  
1 Centre Street  
New York, NY 10007

Commissioner Cynthia Brann  
New York City Department of Correction  
75-20 Astoria Blvd  
East Elmhurst, NY 11370

Commissioner Steven Banks  
New York City Human Resources Administration  
150 Greenwich Street  
New York, NY 10007

Commissioner Louise Carroll  
New York City Department of Housing  
Preservation and Development  
100 Gold Street  
New York, NY 10038

Commissioner Anthony J. Annucci  
New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision  
1220 Washington Ave  
Albany, NY 12226

RE:  Emergency reentry housing in New York City for early releases due to Covid-19

Dear Mayor de Blasio, Director Glazer, Commissioner Brann, Commissioner Banks, Commissioner Carroll, and Commissioner Annucci:

During this period of unprecedented instability for all New Yorkers due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we must protect our most vulnerable communities. We thank the City for taking quick steps to release the people incarcerated at Rikers who are at risk of being exposed to Covid-19, especially those who are most susceptible to the virus. However, as advocates for safe and healthy housing, we are concerned about the dire housing needs for justice-involved New Yorkers who need access to safe and affordable housing. As over 50% of individuals released from New York State prisons in 2018 were released directly into New York City’s shelter system, we are also deeply concerned about how early releases could worsen the homelessness crisis. Most immediately, we must prevent severe overcrowding of New York City shelters as a matter of public health and safety during the Covid-19 crisis.

We urge New York City to take immediate action toward the implementation of the following emergency recommendations. Together, these recommendations can protect people who are being released from New York City jails and state prisons and their communities by securing their access to housing. In order to mitigate this harm, we suggest that the City does the following:

Test all individuals being released for Covid-19.
It is reported that the infection rate at Rikers outpaces New York City’s rate by more than sixfold. To prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, all individuals being released from city jails and state prisons and returning to New York City should be tested upon release. Though tests have been difficult to receive for all New Yorkers, the higher infection rate at Rikers, and possibly at state prisons, makes this testing a public health and safety necessity.
• Provide emergency, single-occupancy housing to all newly-released individuals who test positive for Covid-19 or who are awaiting their test results. To prevent the further spread of the virus to the shelter population and communities across the City, these individuals must have enough space to quarantine themselves. This will require coordination across city agencies, namely the Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Homeless Services (DHS).

Expand housing access for individuals being released.
As we already face the challenge of reentry housing scarcity, the City’s decision to release individuals requires increased emergency housing access. This is critical to prevent dramatic overcrowding in the New York City shelter system. To supply this need, funding sources should be streamlined to support emergency housing for rapid rehousing. This can be achieved in the following ways:

• **Unlock emergency transitional units.** During this pandemic, there are vacant spaces across New York City that can serve as emergency transitional housing for those being released, including vacant housing, hotels, and recreation and community centers that have been closed. DHS and non-profit organizations are currently using hotel rooms for people in the shelter system who are symptomatic, have tested positive, or have been exposed to Covid-19. This model can be replicated to provide emergency spaces to quarantine for these individuals. In addition to those who have tested positive or been exposed to Covid-19, emergency units must be guaranteed for those who cannot secure letters of assurance for housing and cannot be released from their facility yet.

• **Increase resources for emergency rapid rehousing and short-term assistance provided by non-profit organizations.** With quickly accessible operating dollars and rental assistance, non-profit organizations can rapidly rehouse newly released people in emergency, transitional, or permanent housing. As newly-released individuals may face severe obstacles to securing unemployment insurance benefits and therefore have difficulty paying rent, these resources can also support property managers with rental income.

• **Expand access to and fully fund voucher and rental assistance programs to house these individuals.** While emergency transitional housing is needed immediately for individuals being released early, we know the swell in housing instability for justice-involved New Yorkers from this pandemic will continue for months or years. Unemployment rates will be far higher for individuals exiting incarceration, with the various barriers to securing work compounding the existing barriers of Covid-19. To plan for future steps for recovery, the City needs a stable funding stream and well-resourced programs to provide service-rich transitional housing. These programs include:
  • Section 8 vouchers,
  • SOTA vouchers,
  • CityFHEPS, and
  • Justice Involved Supportive Housing (JISH)

The Human Resources Administration (HRA) requires that new apartments for clients transitioning from homelessness be inspected by the DHS to ensure the unit is habitable and free of health hazards. These inspections should continue virtually so people with vouchers can move into housing as soon as possible.

• **Increase resources for service providers.** As service providers are now operating virtually, they need financial assistance in order to continue with their operations and prepare for increased caseloads from these new releases. These services include but are not limited to: food access,
medical services, mental health services, employment assistance, financial counseling, housing search assistance, and substance abuse services. Service providers also need access to technology in order to continue their operations.

**Collaborate with NYCHA to reduce barriers to entry.** As many people being released may have family in public housing, the City and State should collaborate with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to change their temporary guest policies so that people with conviction records can stay with their families by expanding resources for the Family Reentry Pilot Program. Additionally, this includes removing background check barriers, expediting requests for temporary admission, modifying temporary admission requirements, and suspending inspections. Other New York State public housing authorities should take similar action.

The organizations signed below urge you to take immediate action to protect the critical vulnerabilities of justice-involved New Yorkers during this pandemic, and to ensure this public health crisis does not intensify the homelessness crisis in New York City.

Sincerely,

Enterprise Community Partners  
The Fortune Society  
Vera Institute of Justice  
Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
Bard Prison Initiative  
RiseBoro Community Partnership  
Wavecrest Management  
Noble Ventures Fund