This memorandum summarizes the Prison Society’s walkthrough of the Philadelphia Detention Center (DC) on January 18, 2023.

The walkthrough re-enforced findings that have been repeatedly brought to your attention following walkthroughs of facilities within The Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP) since June, 2021.

In particular, people in DC report:

- Being locked in dormitory units for extended periods without staff supervision
- Little access to programming, books, and activities
- Insufficient food, including no food served after 4:00pm
- Delays in access to medical services
- Continual presence of rodents

While many issues we have previously reported persist, there were marked improvements in some areas:

- Prompt delivery of commissary orders and prompt refunds for unavailable items
- Utilization of the gym for recreation
- Weekly laundry delivery

Background

The Pennsylvania Prison Society serves as Pennsylvania’s independent prison monitor. The Society assists people in custody resolving issues related to their health, safety, and dignity.

On January 18, 2023, Prison Monitoring Director Noah Barth and five Prison Society volunteers were escorted by members of the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP) Senior staff. The walkthrough included a tour of three housing units and structured interviews with 48 incarcerated men. All interviews were voluntary, anonymous, and interviewees were randomly selected. All interviews were
conducted in dormitory areas one-on-one or in small groups. We also visited the medical and mental health units and spoke with incarcerated people there.

Two of the units we observed, Units D and E, were areas with approximately 20 bunk beds enclosed in bars. Each unit is configured in a triangle shape with an upper level and a lower level, with four barred-in “dormitories” on each level. In the center is a staff control bubble and walkways. In each housing area there is a restroom area with two sinks, three toilets, and two showers. The third unit we observed, Unit I, is a more traditional dormitory configuration with a single open room containing approximately 40 bunk beds.

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<th>Unit</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>General population</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>General population</td>
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**Locked in dormitory units for extended periods without staff supervision**

People we interviewed stated they are kept in the small, caged, dormitory areas almost all the time. This is consistent with what people told us on our previous walkthroughs of DC in September 2021.

Recreation, outdoors or in a gym, is unusual. On the day of our walkthrough, we were heartened to see men using a gym. When we asked about gym access, it was reported that men are only allowed into the gym when external circumstances require vacating the dorms.

*The only time we go to the gym is when the exterminator comes, but really it’s just the COs shaking down our stuff.*

*It depends on what they’re doing. They might come in to paint or spray for bugs, so maybe two hours. But we don’t go out just for rec.*

One group of four men we interviewed in a dormitory for people 40 years and older reported “we don’t get the gym,” further explaining that only younger men are
provided access. Another man in the group stated that “they make us sign the paper anyway,” to record recreation time even when it was not provided. A third man in the group said that staff threaten to turn the phones off if they do not sign the recreation sheet, even if they haven’t gotten rec time.

Similarly, incarcerated people we interviewed shared that they rarely get access to fresh air.

> I haven’t been outside once in the four months that I’ve been here. Not once.

> In three months, I’ve never been outside.

The only people we interviewed who had gotten outside were four participants in a dog training program who told us they are allowed out for 5-10 minutes to walk the dogs.

One of our staff escorts stated that there is no outdoor access allowed in the summer or winter. He explained that during summer and winter months “extreme temperatures” and the fact that they don’t have a way to allow people back inside before the end of rec time if they become uncomfortable makes it difficult to administer outdoor rec.

**Little access to programming, books, and activities**

> We watch tv and have cards, that’s it. No library.

> Aside from those little games over there, that’s about it. We don’t’ get no regular library.

> No, there’s no stimulation. Food and TV. That’s the only stimulation.

In the units we visited there was a single TV posted high on a column. This is the same as in several other PDP facilities, except that because men are in “dorm” areas more of them can see the common TV than in other PDP facilities. It was not clear who controls the TV. The games the quote above references were a couple of highly worn checkers sets and similar games on a cart. This is similar to what we saw at ASD, and though extremely limited, there are more activities available at DC than at most PDP facilities.
Another man explained the impact of the lack of activities on mental health: “they gotta have more activities to keep us busy, we’re stressed out.”

Two men reported having job assignments on paper, but that staff never brings them to their jobs.

**Insufficient food**

The majority of people we interviewed reported that the portions of food provided are insufficient.

*The Portions are like real little.*

*It’s not enough. My 10-year-old daughter eats more than that.*

We did not ask about the timing of meals but several of the men we interviewed raised this as a specific concern.

*They serve dinner at 4:00pm. If you don’t get food from the commissary, then there is nothing to eat from 4:00pm until breakfast.*

Another man we spoke to estimated breakfast, lunch, and dinner were each served only two to three hours apart, with no food served for 15 hours between 4:00pm and 7:00am.

Other complaints focused on the quality and lack of variety.

*Grits and potatoes everyday*

*It's the same food. It don’t change.*

*Every day they get PB+J sandwiches. Jelly comes in a little squeeze packet.*

*No fruit, no lettuce, no spinach. You’ll get a few peas, maybe a piece of broccoli, that’s it.*
Lack of response to sick call requests and medical emergencies

The failure to respond to sick call requests in a timely manner is another issue that came up repeatedly during the walkthrough.

Forty out of 48 interviewees said that they had tried to access medical care. Of those 40, 21 said that they had to wait for longer than one week to be seen.

*They don’t call you.*

*I put in three slips for dental care; was never called.*

*By the time they called me, the situation was already taken care of.*

This was consistent with reports shared in prior walkthrough memos.

Two men referenced an incident where a man had a seizure and the guards took over half an hour to respond.

*Somebody was about to die last month. There was one guard and he went to lunch and someone was having a seizure and we had to bang on everything for 45 minutes. Then someone came and they didn’t do anything.*

*Somebody had a seizure a week ago. It took 30 minutes of shouting to get them out.*

Another person referenced an urgent medical incident that had happened to them.

*I woke up coughing up blood and no one was here, I had to wait until the morning.*
Limited access to the law library

Forty-four out of 48 men interviewed said that they had tried to access the law library. Of those 44, 16 said that they had faced difficulty gaining access.

One person said, “it depends on how busy the COs are.” Another explained that “everything is on their time.” Another person we interviewed said “they don’t call you down. The list doesn’t come around.”

Rodents; physical plant issues

People we interviewed reported a constant presence of mice in housing areas.

*I mean yeah, there’s mice everywhere.*

*I killed five mice last month. We had fleas last month, I guess from the mice coming in.*

Several people we interviewed reported that the dormitory areas had been cleaned prior to the Prison Society’s visit.

*Yesterday they removed about 30 dead mice from the closed unit next door in preparation for your visit.*

*Can you come every week? It’s never been this clean here.*

*They said you’re coming and made us clean up the whole place.*

We observed poorly maintained shower areas in all three units we visited including mold, rust, peeling paint, discarded clothing items, and broken lights.
Prompt delivery of commissary items and prompt issuing of refunds for unavailable items.

In contrast to previous visits to DC and other PDP facilities, the men we interviewed reported receiving prompt refunds for undelivered commissary items.

*The day you get your commissary, the items you didn’t get the money is already back on your books.*

*They give the money the next week.*

*The commissary works good because it doesn’t come from the jail and it’s run from outside.*

This is a marked improvement over what we have reported in earlier memos.

**Weekly laundry delivery**

The majority of people we interviewed reported that they receive clean sheets once a week. This also stands in contrast to our prior visits to DC and other PDP facilities. At least two people told us that laundry was often delivered three or four in the morning.

**Recommendations**

This walkthrough reinforced findings from previous visits to DC and other PDP facilities. Many of the recommendations provided here are repeated from previous walkthrough memoranda.
The need for improved management and leadership

For close to two years the Prison Society has documented the dangerous and degrading conditions in the Philadelphia prisons. While there were improvements on this walkthrough – particularly with regard to commissary services and laundry – it barely counts for progress when Philadelphians are confined to rat-infested, caged areas, with insufficient food and insufficient healthcare for weeks or months at a time while their mental health deteriorates.

In 2022, 10 people in Philadelphia custody died, and countless others had their physical and mental health significantly degraded. We conducted this walkthrough and are sending this memo in an effort to help avoid the same outcome for 2023.

Exactly one year ago the City hired former Corrections Secretary John Wetzel to advise the City on how to end the jail crisis. We respectfully request that the City immediately make public Secretary Wetzel’s findings and recommendations.

The ongoing crisis at the City’s correctional facilities is the confluence of too few correctional staff, administrative inefficiencies resulting in people staying in jail longer than is needed, and serious physical plant and management problems. After two years of this crisis, it is easy to become numb to this tragedy. Yet, until decisive action is taken, more people will die, be injured, be emotionally degraded, and violence in Philadelphia will continue to rise.

Locked in cells for extended periods without staff supervision

- Individuals in general housing should be permitted out of their dormitories and given access to the gym at least daily and for longer periods of time.
- Outdoor recreation should be made available to all people in PDP custody on a daily basis all year.
- Procedures should be put in place to create consistency in how many people are being let out of their dormitory cells at each time and a schedule should be clearly communicated to the incarcerated population.
- Staff should be assigned and present inside each housing unit 24 hours a day.
- Senior staff should periodically make unannounced housing unit tours during different shifts to monitor if recreation time and programming is being provided.

Lack of activities in dormitory areas

The City of Philadelphia should provide daily activities that can be conducted while in cells such as books, puzzles, or ebooks. Approaches to consider include:
• Providing ebooks, games, and other programming on the GTL prison tablets, similar to what Allegheny County, Berks County, Delaware County and the PA DOC have done. To do this equitably, Philadelphia would need to purchase enough tablets to enable every resident to have a few hours with a tablet each day. These tablets will be used well beyond the pandemic. If possible, Philadelphia may wish to consider an alternative tablet provider that has more extensive educational programming at less cost to the incarcerated patron.

• Weekly distribution of hard-copy activity books or magazines, similar to the puzzle books the Prison Society donated to the Department of Prisons at the Prison Society’s expense in 2021.

**Insufficient food**

• The schedule of meal preparation and delivery should be reorganized to allow for three to four hours between meals with dinner served no earlier than 6:00pm.

**Lack of response to sick call requests and medical emergencies**

• Identify and address hurdles for getting requests for medical care processed and responded to in a reasonable time.

**Lack of access to law library**

• Immediately resume library and law library access for all incarcerated individuals. The inmate handbook states that “the law library is available to you.”

**Rodents; physical plant issues.**

• Institute a quarterly maintenance inspection and repair schedule for all showers in PDP facilities.
• Order immediate inspection by pest control of all PDP facilities, starting with DC.
• Increase pest control inspection and remediation schedules and assign administrative staff to regularly review completion reports.

Thank you for facilitating this walkthrough. The Prison Society is a partner in ensuring the health, safety, and dignity of Philadelphians in prison.
We would appreciate a written response to this memorandum within two weeks of receipt. Thank you for this opportunity to be of service.

We look forward to scheduling our next walkthrough.

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1 Greg Vrato, Philadelphia Department of Prisons, Chief of Staff
John Wetzel, Philadelphia Department of Prisons, Consultant
Christina Pastrana Hernandez, Mayor’s Chief of Staff
Tumar Alexander, Managing Director
Members of City Council
Diana Cortes, City Solicitor
Larry Krasner, District Attorney
Keisha Hudson, Chief Defender
Alexander DeSantis, Inspector General
Idee Fox, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas
Lisette Shirdan-Harris, Administrative Judge, Court of Common Pleas
Joffie Pittman, Supervising Judge, Municipal Court
Lucretia Clemons, Supervising Judge of Criminal Trials
Patrick Dugan President Judge, Municipal Court
Philadelphia Prison Advisory Board
Office of Governor Wolf
Philadelphia members of the Pennsylvania Legislature
Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General
Ilana Eisenstein DLA Piper
Thomas Greishaw, PA DOC

ii https://www.prisonsociety.org/news-and-resources

iii Andrea Striepen, Yvonne Newkirk, Aidan King, Juliene James, Carlton Miller, and John Knapich

iv Chief of Staff Vrato, Deputy-Commissioner Beaufort, Deputy-Warden LaCombe
April 25, 2023

Claire Shubik-Richards
Executive Director
Pennsylvania Prison Society
230 S. Broad St., Suite 605
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Dear Ms. Shubik-Richards,

I am writing in response to your March 31, 2023 memorandum concerning the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP). Your letter is based on the January 18, 2023 tour of the Philadelphia Detention Center (DC) conducted by Prison Monitoring Director Noah Barth and five (5) Pa Prison Society Volunteers.

Of course, we are also concerned about the allegations and other issues you raise. As you know, we are under federal court monitoring pursuant to the Remick litigation. The issues you raise are addressed in the monitoring reports, which are posted on our Prison webpage to ensure access to stakeholders and citizens. We continue to work diligently to address these issues which continue to challenge corrections.

Regarding reports by incarcerated persons that they are “locked in dormitory units for extended periods without staff supervision,” I would like to have my team investigate these allegations that personnel has abandoned their posts, which, if true, warrant possible disciplinary action. If your team received additional details such as dates and general timeframes, I would appreciate your sharing this information with us.

Regarding the provision of recreation time, our goal is to provide daily recreation according to the weekly schedule. Despite continuous efforts to improve, we recognize that we are not always able to meet that goal. Although incarcerated persons in DC dormitories are free to move about inside the dormitories and are not confined to cells, I understand the necessity for gym and outdoor recreation time and would like to ensure that we are offering it consistently. It is disheartening to hear that incarcerated persons reported being threatened or forced to sign recreation records, and I would like to investigate this as well. As with the above allegation, we are inquiring about dormitories with incarcerated persons and staff but would appreciate any additional information you can offer, even if only dates alleged, to assist with our inquiry.
Regarding access to reading and writing materials, individuals housed in the Detention Center have access to word search puzzles and educational tablets. We appreciate the feedback and recommendations, however, and will explore additional options to improve in this area as well. You may have noted that we are currently exploring the procurement of tablets for the entire population, which would include additional educational programming and activities.

Regarding complaints about the food, the City’s food service provider prepares meals based on the nutrition standards of the 2020-2025 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which includes recommended daily caloric intakes. Of course, we strive to ensure that meals are always served on schedule and continue to evaluate ways that we can enhance the meals provided to the DC population and throughout PDP’s facilities in accordance with healthy food standards.

We are also concerned about allegations that sick call requests and medical emergencies are lacking responses. Again, we would like to investigate and any additional information you were authorized to share would assist us. We continue to work through our medical backlogs and are making consistent progress. Sick Call slips are picked up every evening by medical records staff from a locked "Sick Call" receptacle on all housing units. Our contracted medical provider is working diligently to ensure sick call requests are triaged and individuals receive timely care. We will review our sick calls to ensure that anyone who submitted a sick call request is checked to ensure that the patient has been seen by the medical provider.

Regarding access to the law library, as you are aware, we have been challenged to ensure consistent access for some incarcerated persons. We are, however, making improvements with sign-up sheets and increasing access as consistent out-of-cell time increases. We will continue to monitor this issue to ensure greater access to the law library in DC.

Regarding the vermin complaints, we maintain our pest control contract to provide routine, preventative pest control. Pest control remains a challenge in some of our facilities including DC, and we are continually monitoring housing units and modifying pest control schedules and treatment schedules to correct any problems. After each meal, an effort by the correctional staff is made to collect the food trays from the dormitory housing unit to limit the spreading of vermin. To further avoid attracting vermin, we reiterate to the population that any commissary food items in their housing areas must be properly stored.

I appreciate your acknowledgments regarding the positive feedback that you received from the DC population. Specifically, you acknowledge positive feedback regarding the prompt delivery of commissary orders and prompt refunds for unavailable items; utilization of the gym for recreation; and weekly laundry delivery. I’m pleased to hear that the incarcerated population in DC acknowledged efficiency regarding these items.

I reiterate our commitment to continue to manage through and to improve our operations at all facilities as we continue to manage through the endemic. We will continue to strive to optimize clean, healthy, and safe conditions for our incarcerated population while ensuring that they receive proper time out of their cells with access to services and activities. We understand and support your need to maintain confidentiality and identify information about some incarcerated
persons you met with. We also appreciate you identifying issues in PDP facilities and again request that you share any specific details to assist with our investigations into some of the allegations you report. If you are willing, we would also welcome an exit meeting on the day of your regular site visits. If we learn of these issues right away, we can look into the allegations and get people assistance more quickly and initiate any inquiries immediately. In the meantime, PDP continues to work on improving operations and conditions throughout the DC facility. I will ensure that all aspects of our operations and services are continuously reviewed and monitored.

Regarding Mr. Wetzel’s report, it remains in progress and the City will release it upon completion.

Sincerely,

Blanche Carney, MSS Commissioner

cc: John Wetzel, Consultant
    Tomar Alexander, Managing Director
    Christina Hernandez, Mayor’s Chief of Staff
    Members of City Council
    Diana Cortez, City Solicitor
    Keisha Hudson, Chief Defender
    Larry Krasner, District Attorney
    Alexander DeSantis, Inspector General
    Idee Fox, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas
    Lisette Shirdan-Harris, Administrative Judge, Court of Common Pleas
    Joffie Pittman, Supervising Judge, Municipal Court
    Lucretia Clemons, Supervising Judge of Criminal Trials
    Patrick Dugan, President Judge, Municipal Court
    Philadelphia Prison Advisory Board
    Office of Governor Josh Shapiro
    Philadelphia Members of the Pennsylvania Legislature
    Thomas Greishaw, PA DOC