

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/08/31/city-responds-on-emergency-plans-for-rikers-island/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 31, 2011

On Monday morning, after our story on [Rikers Island and Hurricane Irene](#), highlighting the lack of any evacuation plan for New York City's island jail, was [widely circulated](#) on websites, Facebook, and Twitter, we were contacted by Sharman Stein, Deputy Commissioner for Public Information at the New York City Department of Corrections. She wrote: Every single one of the inmates were totally fine during the storm and there were absolutely no incidents of any kind related to the storm on Rikers, other than a couple of downed trees (which caused no harm) and some minor flooding in trailers on the perimeter of the island (which are used as offices, and do NOT house inmates.) Most importantly, there was a complete plan in place to ensure inmates safety.

After we asked for further details, we were forwarded the following information, which is identical to that received by *New York Magazine* and several other publications after they picked up our story.

City officials carefully reviewed Rikers Island, as they did the entire city, and they determined that no section of Rikers Island facilities are in Zone A [which was evacuated on Saturday]. Rikers Island facilities are not in low-lying areas, its not a costal location and, like nearby small islands Roosevelt Island and City Island, it did not need to be evacuated.

A full Corrections Department staff remained on Rikers Island throughout the storm. The jails and other services (kitchens, energy systems, medical care, emergency services, etc.) make Rikers a fully self-sustaining entity, prepared to operate and care for inmates in extended emergency conditions.

Deputy Commissioner Stein forwarded to us a checklist headed Department of Corrections Storm Preparations, which included such items as fueling up vehicles, checking emergency equipment, testing emergency generators, stocking a seven-day supply of food, and securing all items in the perimeter that have the potential of becoming airborne.

Knowing that on any given day Rikers Island holds a minimum of 12,000 prisoners, as well as hundreds of corrections officers and other staff, and is connected to the rest of New York City by a single narrow causeway, we were still concerned with what might happen in an emergency more dire than that presented by Hurricane Irene. We submitted further inquiries, as follows: 1) We asked what hurricane evacuation zone, if any, Rikers Island in (since no zone is indicated on the evacuation map), and whether there would be any evacuation in the event of a higher category hurricane. 2) We asked whether any evacuation plan exists for any sort of emergency, be it a hurricane or another kind of natural or manmade disaster. 3) We noted that they mayor, who went into extensive detail about other aspects of storm and evacuation preparations, was not similarly forthcoming in response to questions about Rikers; he simply stated that the jail would not be evacuated, and offered no information or reassurance about plans to keep inmates safe.

We received the following response to our questions from Deputy Commissioner buy phentermine 37.5 online Stein. The statement does at last provide clarification regarding hurricane zones. It also appears to say that no plan for an emergency evacuation of Rikers Island currently exists.

1.) There are four categories of hurricane: Category 1, 2, 3, and 4. There are also four hurricane evacuation zones: A, B, C, and No Zone. The vast majority of Rikers Island is located in a No Flood Zone; only one facility is located in Zone C. The first floor of that one facility may be vulnerable to flooding and in that case, those inmates would be relocated from the first floor to higher floors in the jail or moved temporarily to other facilities on Rikers Island. It is only a portion of the outer perimeter of the island where there are no jails that might be vulnerable to flooding, even in a Category 4.

Whenever a DOC practice may result in non-conformance with a city (Board Of Correction) or state (State Commission on Corrections) standard, the DOC must secure that body's prior approval. In this case, for example, we contacted the NYC Board of Correction (BOC) regarding our proposal to cancel visitation on Saturday and Sunday, consistent with the metropolitan areas plans to suspend public transportation. On Sunday, we also discussed with the BOC that the Department had found no need to relocate any inmates, as well as the sufficiency of food and medical supplies on hand, the absence of flooding on Rikers Island roads, and the fact that the roads were passable for emergency medical vehicles.

2.) Given its elevation, Rikers Island can withstand any storm up to and including a Category 4 hurricane. The DOC maintains plans and

periodically updates its plans to respond to a variety of disasters. For example, as recently as last month when there was a fire in a housing unit late at night, the DOC evacuated 407 inmates from six housing units in the immediate area without incident, and then reassigned 234 of them (the rest were able to return to their original housing units).

Any emergency impacting the whole of Rikers Island would also be affecting the region. It is the position of this administration that the personal safety of its staff and the inmate population be preserved and as such, evacuation to the extent it may be warranted would occur. The DOC response to a disaster of this magnitude would be integrated of course, into a city or region-wide strategy.

3.) You rightly point out that the Mayor discussed in detail elements of storm preparation and evacuation. Once again, the reason he did not discuss Rikers is because Rikers like other areas of the City not discussed was not in an evacuation zone. The City was focused on communicating important information about where the dangers lie. Rikers Island was never in danger from this storm.



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

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what a classic case of evasion as well as pass the buck..other states evacuated their prisoners.what we want to know is- for future storms, are there any plans? I understand the concern for safety- as in not telling us the exact plans for fear of escapes-but the families need to know that there are plans in place let us remember that not everyone in Rikers has been convicted and every single person there is HUMAN and therefor should be treated with dignity.

Im glad to see you posted this clarification. People had themselves all tied up in knots over the city not having an evacuation plan, when no one can identify a single event in the 400+ year history of the City of New York that would have required evacuation of a site with the geographic characteristics of Rikers Island.

What is really troubling to me, though, is how many online outlets ran with this story, with apparently nobody bothering to do the five minutes worth of fact-checking to verify if there was any substance to the story (I know, because I did my own fact-checking).

I personally email your story to a yahoo news reporter.

after commenting on her story. Im glad others did the same, SW is good but it is not mainstream and everyone that follows SW needs to forward your reports to bigger media.

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