

New York City lawyers suggest health care provider committed a crime in death of Rikers Island inmate

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Recently released documents filed by attorneys for the City of New York in a civil suit over the death of Rikers Island inmate Bradley Ballard in 2013 indicate that the city will withdraw its support from Corizon, the prison's health care provider. The city's multimillion-dollar contract with the private company allows it to take such an action only when there is "intentional misconduct or a criminal act" on the part of Corizon.

Ballard, a 39-year-old schizophrenic, died in 2013 after he spent seven days locked alone in a cell. According to the lawsuit, Ballard was not given food for at least two days. Corizon mental health workers were tasked with visiting him two times a day to give him his medication. He received none for most of the week. He was found dead on September 11, naked, covered in his own feces with a rubber band wrapped tightly around his genitals.

According to the *New York Daily News*, coroners found that Ballard, who was also a diabetic, had an extremely high blood sugar level at the time of his death.

Sidney Schwartzbaum, the Deputy Wardens' union president, stated in relation to Ballard's death, "Why medical staff didn't alert uniformed staff of the fact that he didn't receive his medication is still unanswered."

A report released in June by New York City's Department of Investigation (DOI) further exposes criminally negligent actions by Corizon, the nation's largest corporate prison health care provider. The report shows that Corizon workers frequently neglected their responsibility to monitor inmates on suicide watch—including Ballard.

In a different case, a Corizon worker took an

unnamed 17-year-old off court-ordered suicide watch without consulting a psychiatrist. The minor hanged himself in his cell and died of his injuries 10 days later. On June 10, 18-year-old Kennan Davis hanged himself in Rikers after asking for psychiatric care.

The report also detailed the negligent hiring practices of Corizon, which allowed an estimated 12 workers with criminal records—including a convicted murderer and a kidnapper—to work at Rikers Island. Corizon sent fingerprints of potential employees to the Corrections Department, which, in turn, did not check the prints for criminal records.

The administration of Bill de Blasio announced last June that the city would not renew its contract with Corizon. Since 2008, the city has paid \$367 million to Corizon to operate the health system at Rikers Island.

The horrific conditions at Rikers Island extend well beyond the practices of Corizon. A 2014 report by the office of the US Attorney for Southern District of New York cited "a culture of violence" at the institution. An investigative report by the *New York Times* revealed the routine beatings of inmates by groups of guards. One hundred and twenty-nine inmates, most of whom were mentally ill, suffered "serious injuries" from beatings by prison guards in 2013.

Between last August and January of this year there have been 62 cases of inmates being seriously injured by correction officers, according to the *New York Times*.

The administration of Michael Bloomberg, with bipartisan backing throughout his 12 years in office, continued and escalated the longstanding abuses at Rikers Island. Now, the de Blasio administration, posing as "progressive," is trying to distance itself from

these brutal practices with window-dressing reforms.

The administration moved last year to install a new corrections commissioner, Joseph Ponte, at Rikers Island. The city administration has also invested \$130 million over the next four years to supposedly retrain New York police officers to assess the mental health of those arrested, and to create Crisis Intervention Teams at Rikers, “composed of corrections and health workers to deescalate incidents,” according a press release put out last December.

Rikers guards, nevertheless, used physical force against inmates 4,074 times in 2014—the highest use of force in over a decade—according to the Corrections Department. This increase in violence occurred even as the prison’s daily population declined by 4,000 inmates compared to a decade ago.

The barbaric conditions at Rikers Island are a reflection of a national trend of escalating violence and neglect in the prison system. This included the torture of inmates by guards at the Clinton Correction Facility in upstate New York—after the escape of two prisoners—which occurred only hours after New York governor Andrew Cuomo visited the institution.



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