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The entrance to the Rikers Island Correctional Department facility. Photo: Reuters/Stapleton

NEWS

City to Pay Up to \$53 Million in Settlement for Isolated Conditions in NYC Jails

Cuti Hecker Wang partner Eric Hecker said he hopes the settlement will provide relief to the class members even though it “cannot undo the substantial psychological harm these conditions have caused.”

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Attorneys representing people held in harsh conditions at New York City jails on Wednesday announced they have reached a settlement with the city valued at up to \$53 million, with individual class members receiving an average of more than \$9,000.

The class members' attorneys, including lawyers at Cuti Hecker Wang and Alex Reinert, a law professor at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, had argued that the class members, all pretrial detainees, faced conditions that at times "approached those experienced in solitary confinement."

The suit concerns more than 4,000 class members housed in two facilities at Rikers Island and in one unit of the Manhattan Detention Complex, which closed in 2020.

"As the Second Amended Complaint alleges, people confined in the Covered Facilities were denied sufficient access to programming, recreation, a dayroom, natural light, freedom of movement, and psychological monitoring, among other deprivations," Reinert wrote in a filing seeking court approval of the settlement Wednesday.

The exact amounts each class member is due to receive will depend on how long they spent in the conditions at issue in the suit. Attorneys for the class plan to ask U.S. District Judge Kevin Castel of the Southern District of New York to award up to 25% of the settlement money for attorneys' fees and costs.



Solitary confinement cell called “the bing,” at New York’s Rikers Island jail on January 28, 2016. Photo: Beбето Matthews/AP

In a statement on the settlement, a spokesman for the New York City Law Department said the “safety of all individuals on Rikers is among the City’s highest priorities.”

“While the housing assignments at issue reflected these safety concerns, the practices that led to this litigation have been modified,” the spokesman said. “This settlement is in the best interests of all parties.”

Reinert said he hopes the case will ensure better treatment in the future.

“The Board of Correction has made progress towards ending inhumane practices of restrictive confinement in New York, but the Department of Correction tried to end-run around those reforms with practices that we challenged here,” he said in a statement. “We hope this litigation will ensure that the City permanently ceases this practice, and that the settlement will provide much-deserved compensation to the people who were subjected to it.”

Cuti Hecker Wang partner Eric Hecker said he hopes the settlement will provide relief to the class members even though it “cannot undo the substantial psychological harm these conditions have caused.”

“No human being should be subjected to such highly isolated confinement, and certainly not without a hearing to challenge that placement,” Hecker said in a statement.