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Crisis at Central Cell Block

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August 31, 2021

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“I can’t believe Black people are still doing the middle passage in downtown DC” – Isaiah Jackson, Who was arrested during a Pride celebration at Dupont Circle and held at CCB over the weekend

Sweltering temperatures, no water, inedible food, and neglectful guards – that is the norm for anybody in D.C. that finds themselves locked up in central cell block (CCB) downtown. For many who have been in and out of the holding cells – or those who have shared their time and resources through community jail support – these disgusting conditions are a well-known norm of the central cell block. However, on June 14th, 2021, as the Summer temperatures rose, the long weekends in CCB became too much as those exiting the jail facility came out complaining of no A.C., little to drink, and several people suffering severe medical emergencies over the weekend.

One woman had five seizures over the course of 40 minutes, a released woman who witnessed the emergency describes. “They were treating her like trash,” she states to a jail support volunteer in a video uploaded to twitter. the jailed woman was accosted by guards who held her down with a knee in her neck and accused her of faking the seizures. When medical assistance finally arrived, her seizures were confirmed and CCB officers were instructed to place the woman in a cool room since heat exacerbates epilepsy. She was, instead, placed back in her heated cell.

This woman was on the ground for so long experiencing seizures that the hospital she visited after release had to remove two cockroaches from her ear. “They didn’t care,” the witness repeats at the end of the video.

Another witness describes a 72-year-old man that suffered three heart attacks over that Sunday night. His story is typical of the medical neglect that goes on in CCB; jail support volunteers frequently see people exit CCB with broken and sprained bones (often injuries that occurred during arrest) or still bleeding wounds

that need to be cleaned and re-bandaged, but the heat made this particular day even worse.

What followed was a scramble to sound the alarm. Word poured into groupchats and social media from the Monday jail support crew. As mutual aid groups and D.C. citizens learned about the June 14th crisis in CCB, they reached out to media and D.C. City Council. Surprisingly, several mainstream news outlets replied and covered the story. This is not the first time media has been contacted regarding CCB, but the broken A/C and particularly heinous weekend were enough to make coverage. Later in the day, D.C. councilmember Charles Allen tweeted that the HVAC system in CCB was under repair. For the remaining week, arrestees were kept in their arresting precinct and quietly returned to CCB later in the week when the HVAC was fixed.

This was a small victory, but it is still a victory. We don't just want nicer prisons – abolition is still the goal. But, for the time being, we must assist those incarcerated on every level. This is why jail support is integral to abolition and mutual aid. Without the jail support comrades that stake out Monday at CCB, rain or shine, we would not even know what happened that weekend.

For many, their first time at jail support was during the 2020 summer of protests when hundreds of protesters were jailed while protesting for Black lives. Their comrades, along with everyone else who exited, came to them without shoelaces, menstrual products, access to nutritious food (if they were given access to food at all), or ways to contact loved ones upon release. Many people were held for days just to be “no papered” or “not charged” with a crime – wages lost, opportunities lost, time lost. Jail support volunteers attempt to remedy this by providing simple toiletries, phone calls, or resources. People will often call the caretaker for their children or pets to make sure that they have been taken care of and that they are safe -many are mothers who suddenly lost contact with their children after arrest.

After a vicious police attack on a December 14th jail support, several comrades became determined to provide community jail support every Monday. This is in addition to Saturday jail support assisted by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC). Go to the corner of 3rd & C St NW on a Saturday or a Monday and you will see a group of care bears ready to provide assistance and support to those who were arrested. They will be there assisting battered women who escaped their abusive partners, just to be put into the system and further brutalized by the state. They will be there to make sure a dad who lost a weekend with his kids can get back to them expeditiously with a Lyft instead of catching the bus. The incarcerated individuals in America is one of our most neglected populations. They are stripped not only of their freedom but simple dignities like access to hygiene products or allergy appropriate food. Jail support reminds us that we keep us safe and we are our own saviors. As the city council moves forward with its budget, and actions continue, the community will make sure the imprisoned receive assistance until abolition is here.