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RECEIVED NYSCEF: 04/05/2023

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK COUNTY OF ALBANY

FUQUAN FIELDS and LUIS GARCIA, on behalf of themselves and all similarly situated individuals.

Plaintiffs-Petitioners.

v.

ANTHONY J. ANNUCCI, as Acting Commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision,

Defendant-Respondent.

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VERIFIED CLASS PETITION AND COMPLAINT

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

- 1. In 2021, New York enacted the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act ("HALT Act" or "HALT"), the most significant reform to our state's prison system in a generation. Some two years on, this lawsuit challenges entrenched practices by which prison officials persist in flouting HALT, subjecting thousands of New Yorkers annually to unlawfully prolonged periods of segregation and other disciplinary confinement in open defiance of the Legislature's express will.
- 2. Consensus is now clear that solitary confinement—the use of extreme isolation as punishment—even for relatively short periods, inflicts profound, sometimes irreversible, psychological damage on incarcerated individuals. Yet for decades, DOCCS has persisted in imposing long periods of solitary confinement and other similar forms of segregated confinement, exacting a devastating toll on generations of incarcerated people.

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3. In 2021, the State Legislature took action to stem this practice, passing the HALT Act, which imposes specific limits on who can be placed in segregation and certain other forms of disciplinary confinement, and for how long and why.

- 4. Among its key provisions, the HALT Act caps placement in segregated confinement to three consecutive days or six days in any 30-day period in most circumstances. Under the Act, DOCCS may exceed those limits—imposing "extended segregation" of up to 15 consecutive days total, or 20 days in any 60-day period—only on a written finding pursuant to an evidentiary hearing that two criteria are met: first that an individual has committed one of seven specifically enumerated acts; and second, that the infraction was sufficiently "heinous or destructive" to create both a significant risk of serious physical injury and an unreasonable security risk. These criteria must also be met for DOCCS to place an individual in a Residential Rehabilitation Unit, a rehabilitative alternative setting to solitary confinement—for any period of time.
- 5. In practice, DOCCS has flouted these durational limits as a matter of course, imposing disciplinary segregated confinement for acts not specified by statute and without making individualized or written determinations that these statutory requirements are met. Instead, DOCCS has adopted a categorical approach by which all charges adjudicated in a Tier III disciplinary hearing—the most serious level in DOCCS's tripartite disciplinary system qualify as one the seven specifically enumerated acts and without making the individualized written findings that the conduct was heinous or destructive. This policy and practice (the "Extended Segregation Policy") ensures that, each year, thousands of incarcerated individuals continue to endure extended periods of segregated confinement, as well as other unlawful disciplinary confinement, in excess of the HALT Act's carefully crafted constraints.

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6. Plaintiffs-Petitioners Fuquan Fields and Luis Garcia are two individuals whom DOCCS has unlawfully sentenced, respectively, to 120 days and 730 days of segregated confinement sanctions based on this Extended Segregation Policy. They seek to represent themselves and all similarly situated individuals in challenging these practices; and in so doing, to challenge DOCCS's defiance of the Legislature's reasoned judgment on when and for how long segregation and other forms of disciplinary confinement may be used. Plaintiffs-petitioners seek declaratory relief and Article 78 review of the policies by which DOCCS's subjects them to the harms of disciplinary confinement in violation of the HALT Act.

PARTIES

- 7. Plaintiff-Petitioner Fuquan Fields is a 44-year-old man who is diagnosed with mental illness. Mr. Fields has been incarcerated by DOCCS since 2007 and is currently confined at Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock, New York. On March 20, 2023, Mr. Fields received a final decision on his conviction for a Tier III violation for exposing himself and urinating on the floor while on suicide watch, resulting in a sentence of 120 days in disciplinary confinement. Under DOCCS's Extended Segregation Policy, this confinement sanction has resulted in Mr. Fields's confinement in an RRU, a setting for which compliance with the k(ii) confinement criteria is required.
- 8. Plaintiff-Petitioner Luis Garcia is a 40-year-old man who is diagnosed with mental illness. Mr. Garcia first entered DOCCS custody in 2018 and is currently confined at Five Points Correctional Facility in Romulus, New York. On December 5, 2022, Mr. Garcia received a final decision on his conviction of a Tier III violation after he threw a liquid smelling like urine and feces, which landed on two officers. Mr. Garcia's conviction resulted in a disciplinary sentence of 730 days in disciplinary confinement. Under the Extended Segregation Policy, this

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confinement sanction has resulted in Mr. Garcia's confinement in an RMHU, a setting for which compliance with the k(ii) confinement criteria is required.

9. Defendant-Respondent Anthony J. Annucci is the Acting Commissioner of DOCCS. As such, Defendant-Respondent Annucci has final responsibility for the development and execution of DOCCS policies and practices, including the Extended Segregation Policy. He is sued in his official capacity.

FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS

- A. The New York State Legislature Passes the HALT Act to Limit DOCCS's Use of **Solitary Confinement**
- 10. Solitary confinement involves punishing incarcerated individuals by separating them from the general population and subjecting them to harsh isolation, severe deprivation, and forced idleness. Solitary confinement deprives people of meaningful human interaction and mental stimulation, causing severe, long-lasting, often irreparable harm.
- 11. For decades, DOCCS imposed solitary confinement sanctions with virtual impunity, exercising broad discretion to subject people to lengthy solitary confinement for even relatively minor infractions. DOCCS typically imposed this extended confinement in special housing units ("SHU"), where individuals had no access to rehabilitation or other programming, and frequently suffered mental decompensation.
- DOCCS's frequent use of solitary confinement received widespread 12. condemnation and spurred lawsuits such as Peoples v. Fischer, 2012 WL 1575302 [S.D.N.Y. 2012], which resulted in a settlement imposing reforms to solitary confinement practices across the state.
- 13. Despite the *Peoples* reforms and decades of other advocacy efforts to curtail DOCCS's use of solitary confinement, DOCCS continued to hold hundreds of people in solitary

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confinement for prolonged periods of time. For example, in 2018, 131 individuals incarcerated in DOCCS's facilities had segregated confinement sanctions of one year or more.

- 14. In early 2021, responding to significant public concern over the harmful impact of DOCCS's widespread use of solitary confinement, the New York Legislature passed the HALT Act, imposing stringent limits on who can be placed in solitary, and for how long, and why. The Act came into full effect approximately a year later on March 31, 2022.
- 15. Among other key reforms, the HALT Act limits placement in "segregated confinement"—the Act's term for solitary and other in-cell confinement exceeding 17 hours per day—to a maximum of three consecutive days, or six days in any 30-day period, in most circumstances. See Correction Law ("CL") § 137[6][k][i].
- 16. To extend segregated confinement beyond these durational limits, the Legislature required that DOCCS meet two precisely defined requirements contained in CL § 137(6)(k)(ii), often referred to as the "k(ii) confinement criteria." And DOCCS must also satisfy the k(ii) confinement criteria to impose placement of any duration in a Residential Rehabilitation Unit ("RRU")—a rehabilitative alternative setting to solitary confinement created by the HALT Act or in several other disciplinary confinement settings.¹
- The k(ii) confinement criteria are: first, that DOCCS finds, "by written decision" 17. and "pursuant to an evidentiary hearing," that an individual has committed one or more of seven acts specifically enumerated in the statute; and second, that DOCCS determines, "in writing" and "based on specific objective criteria," that the acts "were so heinous or destructive" that placing

¹ For example, placement in a Residential Mental Health Treatment Unit—a confinement setting for people with serious mental illness that includes Behavioral Health Units and Residential Mental Health Units—requires compliance with the k(ii) confinement criteria. See CL §§ 2[21], 401[1].

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the individual in general-population housing would create both a "significant risk of imminent serious physical injury" and an "unreasonable risk" to facility security.

- 18. The seven enumerated acts that qualify for extended segregation or placement in an applicable alternative confinement setting under the k(ii) confinement criteria—often referred to as the "k(ii)" acts—are defined in using narrow and precise language. They include:
 - (A) causing or attempting to cause serious physical injury or death to another person or making an imminent threat of such serious physical injury or death if the person has a history of causing such physical injury or death and the commissioner and, when appropriate, the commissioner of mental health or their designees reasonably determine that there is a strong likelihood that the person will carry out such threat. [];
 - (B) compelling or attempting to compel another person, by force or threat of force, to engage in a sexual act;
 - (C) extorting another, by force or threat of force, for property or money;
 - (D) coercing another, by force or threat of force, to violate any rule;
 - leading, organizing, inciting, or attempting to cause a riot, (E) insurrection, or other similarly serious disturbance that results in the taking of a hostage, major property damage, or physical harm to another person;
 - (F) procuring a deadly weapon or other dangerous contraband that poses a serious threat to the security of the institution;
 - (G) escaping, attempting to escape or facilitating an escape from a facility or escaping or attempting to escape while under supervision outside such facility.
- 19. Even if DOCCS satisfies both prerequisites to extending segregation under the k(ii) confinement criteria, the HALT Act places an absolute durational cap on extended

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segregation. Under no circumstances may DOCCS keep an individual in segregated confinement for more than 15 consecutive days or 20 days in any 60-day period.

20. Instead, at these absolute limits, the HALT Act requires that DOCCS transfer an individual in extended segregation to an RRU.

B. DOCCS's Extended Segregation Policy

- 21. Despite the HALT Act's clear limits on placing people in extended segregation and other disciplinary confinement, DOCCS has adopted a policy and practice that continues to subject hundreds of individuals to extended confinement sanctions for conduct that does not meet the k(ii) confinement criteria.
- 22. Over a year after the HALT Act became effective, DOCCS has achieved this unlawful result through at least two discrete policy decisions, embodied in the Extended Segregation Policy, to interpret the k(ii) confinement criteria in a manner that contravenes the HALT Act.
- 23. First, as reflected in its Review Officer Training Manual, DOCCS has determined, and instructed relevant disciplinary staff, to treat all conduct charged as "Tier III" infractions as categorically constituting one of the seven k(ii) acts. (See DOCCS Review Officer Training Manual, attached as Exhibit 1.) Accordingly, DOCCS routinely sentences individuals to extended confinement sanctions without any individuated determination that the particular conduct at issue constitutes any of the k(ii) acts.
- 24. Yet while Tier III is the designation reserved for the most serious conduct in DOCCS's tripartite disciplinary designation scheme, it encompasses a variety of conduct extending well beyond the narrow confines of the seven k(ii) acts enumerated in CL § 137(6)(k)(ii). For example, charges such as 112.10 (causing a miscount) and 101.20 (lewd conduct) can be, and frequently are, charged as Tier III offenses.

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25. DOCCS's own data confirms this interpretive decision. The HALT Incident List for January 2023 shows that individuals received SHU sanctions for incidents labelled only as "unhygienic act," "harassment," and "smuggling"—none of which are remotely similar to the seven qualifying k(ii) acts.

- 26. Second, DOCCS routinely fails to make determinations "in writing based on specific objective criteria" that a charged act was "so heinous or destructive" that the actor "creates a significant risk of imminent serious physical injury to staff or other incarcerated persons, and creates an unreasonable risk to the security of the facility."
- 27. Instead, DOCCS appears to have determined on a blanket basis that all misconduct charged as a Tier III offense constitutes one of the seven k(ii) acts, irrespective of the nature of the particular act in question. DOCCS makes this categorical determination without acknowledging the HALT Act's additional prerequisite to extended segregation or disciplinary confinement, such acts must be "so heinous or destructive" to create both a "significant risk of imminent serious physical injury" and "an unreasonable risk to the security of the facility."
- 28. DOCCS's Review Officer Training Manual does not instruct or require officers to consider the "heinous or destructive" standard.
- 29. DOCCS's proposed regulations do not require officers to make a written determination that any particular act is "heinous or destructive" as required under CL § 137(6)(k)(ii).
- 30. Indeed, DOCCS's explanation in response to public comments on its proposed regulations was that though these do not mention the "heinous or destructive" standard, "the revised list of rule violations in which someone can be placed in segregated confinement meet the definition of such terms as defined in CL § 137(6)(k)(ii)."

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31. On information and belief, DOCCS has not developed or disseminated "specific objective criteria" for determining whether misbehavior is sufficiently "heinous and destructive."

- 32. As a result, pursuant to its Extended Segregation Policy, DOCCS considers an individual who is charged with an offense subject to a Tier III hearing—such as an "unhygienic act" for spitting on the floor—to be eligible for segregated confinement in SHU or transfer to an RRU, even though this is not one of the enumerated acts for which the HALT Act allows segregated confinement and even in the absence of any individual determination that the conduct in question is heinous and destructive.
- 33. DOCCS's Extended Segregation Policy has thus led to the confinement of individuals who have committed infractions that the Legislature did not make eligible for extended segregation or placement in disciplinary confinement.
- 34. As a result of its Extended Segregation Policy, DOCCS continues to hold hundreds of incarcerated individuals in segregated confinement for conduct and periods beyond those allowed by law.
- 35. Between January 1 to February 28, 2023, for example, 230 individuals—or 14% of all individuals serving SHU time during that period—were held in solitary confinement in excess of the twenty-day limit within a sixty-day period. And as of March 1, 2023, 90 individuals, or 22% of all individuals serving SHU time, had been kept in solitary confinement in excess of the fifteen consecutive-day limit.

C. The Petitioners-Plaintiffs

Fuquan Fields

Plaintiff-Petitioner Fuquan Fields is currently incarcerated at Great Meadow 36. Correctional Facility.

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37. On January 12, 2023, Mr. Fields was incarcerated at Fishkill Correctional Facility when he began experiencing a mental-health crisis.

- 38. Early that morning, Mr. Fields first began making suicidal statements. Within approximately one hour, he was moved to a hearing room where he was placed in a restraint chair while awaiting escort to be seen by Office of Mental Health ("OMH") staff, for a one-on-one suicide watch.
- 39. While waiting in the hearing room, Mr. Fields informed staff that he needed to use the restroom. Staff ignored this request. (Fields Appeal Form to the Commissioner, attached as Exhibit 2.)
- 40. According to the misbehavior report, roughly two hours later, Mr. Fields exposed himself and urinated on the floor before he could be escorted to the bathroom. The misbehavior report also claims that Mr. Fields began to threaten a Corrections Officer and throw "wet looking sugar packets" at him. (Fields Misbehavior Report dated January 12, 2023, attached as Exhibit 3.)
- 41. The report charged Mr. Fields with violating rules 100.11 (assault on staff), 101.20 (lewd conduct), 102.10 (threats), 106.10 (direct order), and 118.22 (unhygienic act). (Exhibit 3.)
- 42. Because Mr. Fields was placed on suicide watch, Mr. Fields' Tier III disciplinary hearing was delayed several times. His hearing eventually began on January 18, 2023, and concluded on January 27, 2023. (Fields Hearing Disposition dated January 27, 2023, attached as Exhibit 4.).
- 43. A hearing officer found Mr. Fields guilty of 100.11 (assault on staff), 118.22 (unhygienic act), and 101.20 (lewd conduct). (Exhibit 4).

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44. Among other penalties, the hearing officer sentenced Mr. Fields to 180 days of SHU. (Exhibit 4).

- 45. The hearing officer's disposition did not contain a determination that any of the alleged conduct constituted an act defined under Correctional Law § 137(6)(k)(ii)(A)–(G).
- 46. The hearing officer's disposition also contains no written determination by DOCCS, based on specific objective criteria, that Mr. Fields's conduct was so heinous or destructive that his placement in general population housing would create a significant risk of imminent serious physical injury to staff or other incarcerated persons and create an unreasonable risk to the security of the facility.
- 47. Mr. Fields submitted a timely administrative appeal of the hearing and co-counsel Prisoners' Legal Services of New York ("PLS") submitted a supplemental appeal. Among other issues, the supplemental appeal properly raised issues concerning the Extended Segregation Policy.
- 48. On March 20, 2023, the Office of Special Housing issued a written determination affirming the disposition of Mr. Fields's hearing as to the 118.22 (unhygienic act) and 101.20 (lewd conduct) charges. The Office of Special Housing dismissed the 100.11 (assault on staff) charge and modified his penalty from 180 days to 120 days in SHU. (Fields Final Determination, attached as Exhibit 5).
- 49. Mr. Fields began serving his sentence for this confinement sanction on February 8, 2023, and, under DOCCS's Extended Segregation Policy, is currently confined in an RRU.

Luis Garcia

50. Plaintiff-Petitioner Luis Garcia is currently incarcerated at Five Points Correctional Facility.

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51. On September 20, 2022, Mr. Garcia was incarcerated at Coxsackie Correctional Facility where he resided in a Residential Mental Health Unit, a form of housing operated jointly by DOCCS and OMH for individuals with serious mental illness.

- 52. While in his cell, Mr. Garcia allegedly threw an "unknown brown feces smelling liquid" that purportedly hit two officers. (Garcia Misbehavior Report dated September 20, 2022, attached as Exhibit 6).
- 53. A DOCCS employee filed two misbehavior reports charging Mr. Garcia with two counts of 100.11 (assault on staff) and two counts of 118.22 (unhygienic act). (Exhibit 6).
- 54. Two days later, DOCCS transferred Mr. Garcia to Elmira Correctional Facility and placed on suicide watch upon arrival.
- 55. Mr. Garcia's Tier III evidentiary hearing began—in Mr. Garcia's absence—on September 28 and concluded on October 5, 2022. (Garcia Hearing Disposition dated October 5, 2022, attached as Exhibit 7).
- 56. A hearing officer found Mr. Garcia guilty of two counts of 100.11 (assault on staff) and two counts of 118.22 (unhygienic act) as charged in the misbehavior reports.
- 57. Among other penalties, the hearing officer sentenced Mr. Garcia to 730 days of SHU. (Exhibit 7).
- 58. The hearing officer's disposition did not contain a determination that any of the alleged conduct constituted an act defined under CL § 137(6)(k)(ii)(A)–(G).
- 59. The hearing officer's disposition also contained no written determination by DOCCS, based on specific objective criteria, that Mr. Garcia's conduct was so heinous or destructive that his placement in general population housing would create a significant risk of

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imminent serious physical injury to staff or other incarcerated persons and create an unreasonable risk to the security of the facility.

- 60. Mr. Garcia submitted a timely administrative appeal of the hearing and co-counsel PLS submitted a supplemental appeal. Among other issues, the supplemental appeal properly raised issues concerning the Extended Segregation Policy.
- 61. On December 5, 2022, the Office of Special Housing issued a written determination affirming the disposition of Mr. Garcia's hearing. (Garcia Final Determination, attached as Exhibit 8).
- 62. Mr. Garcia began serving his sentence for this confinement sanction on March 19, 2023, and is currently confined in an RMHU.

CLASS ACTION ALLEGATIONS

- 63. This case is brought as a class action pursuant to section 901 of the Civil Practice Law and Rules ("CPLR") on behalf of all individuals in DOCCS custody who are or will be placed in segregated confinement for more than three consecutive days, or six days in any 60-day period; a residential rehabilitation unit; or any other unit for which compliance with CL § 137(6)(k)(ii) is required before placement.
- The proposed class is sufficiently numerous that joinder of all members is 64. impracticable. Defendants-Respondents have subjected hundreds of individuals to unlawfully extended segregation and other unlawful disciplinary confinement under the Extended Segregation Policy since the HALT Act took effect on March 31, 2022; and will continue to do so with respect to additional individuals while the Extended Segregation Policy remains in place.

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65. Members of the proposed class are affected by common questions of law and fact that predominate over questions affecting only individual members. Without limitation, these common questions include:

- a. Whether Defendants maintain the Extended Segregation Policy;
- Whether the Extended Segregation Policy violates CL § 137(6)(k); and
- c. Whether the Extended Segregation Policy is affected by an error of law, is arbitrary and capricious, or otherwise irrational.
- 66. Plaintiffs-Petitioners' claims are typical of those of the proposed class. Plaintiffs-Petitioners challenge the same DOCCS policy on grounds that apply to all members of the proposed class.
- 67. Plaintiffs-Petitioners will fairly and adequately protect the interests of the proposed class. Their interests in opposing the Extended Segregation Policy align closely with those of other members of the proposed class; and their counsel have extensive experience litigating similar matters on a class-wide basis.
- 68. A class action is superior to other available methods for fairly and efficiently adjudicating this controversy. The class action device will minimize financial, administrative, and procedural burdens that individual actions would impose on the Court and the parties—and with particular severity on members of the proposed class, who are incarcerated and predominately indigent. Plaintiffs-Respondents' counsel anticipates no difficult in managing this matter as a class action.

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CAUSES OF ACTION

First Cause of Action: Article 78 Review, CPLR § 7801 et seq.

- 69. Defendants-Respondent's promulgation of and adherence to the Extended Segregation Policy reflects their "fail[ure] to perform a duty enjoined upon [them] by law." CPLR § 7803[1].
- 70. Defendants-Respondent's promulgation of and adherence to the Extended Segregation Policy was and is "affected by an error of law," "arbitrary and capricious" and an "abuse of discretion." Id. § 7803[3].

Second Cause of Action: Declaratory Judgment, CPLR § 3001

71. Plaintiffs-Petitioners are entitled to a declaration that the Extended Segregation Policy violate CL § 137(6)(k).

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

- 72. The Court has jurisdiction over this matter under CPLR §§ 3001 and 7801.
- 73. Under CPLR § 503 as to the declaratory judgment action, and CPLR §§ 506(b) and 7804(b) as to the Article 78 petition, venue is proper in Albany County, where Defendant-Respondent's principal office is located and where the Extended Segregation Policy was promulgated.

REQUEST FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, Plaintiffs request that the Court:

- a. Certify this action as a class action and appoint the undersigned as class counsel;
- b. Declare that the Extended Segregation Policy violates CL § 137(6)(k)(ii);

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c. Compel Defendant-Respondent to comply with the requirements of

CL § 137(6)(k)(ii) before placing any member of the proposed class in

segregated confinement exceeding three consecutive days or six days in any

60-day period; a residential rehabilitation unit; or any other unit for which

compliance with CL § 137(6)(k)(ii) is required;

d. Vacate, annul, and enjoin the Extended Segregation Policy;

e. Vacate and annul Defendant-Respondents' determinations to place members

of the proposed class in extended segregation; a residential rehabilitation unit;

or any other unit for which compliance with CL § 137(6)(k)(ii) is required;

f. Award Plaintiffs-Petitioners reasonable attorney's fees and costs; and

g. Grant any other relief the Court deems just and proper.

Dated: April 5, 2023

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New York, New York

Respectfully submitted,

NEW YORK CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION FOUNDATION

/s/ Antony P.F. Gemmell

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Of Counsel

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SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK **COUNTY OF ALBANY**

FUQUAN FIELDS and LUIS GAR behalf of themselves and all similar individuals,	•	Index No
Plaintiffs-Pet	itioners,	
v. ANTHONY J. ANNUCCI, as Actin Commissioner of the New York Sta Department of Corrections and Corr Supervision, Defendant-Re	te nmunity	<u>VERIFICATION</u>
STATE OF NEW YORK)) ss.:	
COUNTY OF ALBANY)	
ELISE CZUCHNA, an attorn	ey duly admitt	ed to practice before the Courts of this State,
does hereby affirm under penalty of p	perjury that the	following statements are true:
1 Lam a Staff Attorney in the A	Jhany Office o	of Prisoners' Legal Services of New York

2. I have read the foregoing Class Petition and Complaint and know the contents thereof.

attorneys for Plaintiffs-Petitioners in the within proceeding.

- 3. The contents of the foregoing Class Petition and Complaint are true to my own knowledge, except as to matters alleged to be upon information and belief, and, as to those matters, I believe them to be true.
- 4. The grounds for my belief as to all matters not stated upon my knowledge are communications with Fuquan Fields and Luis Garcia, and documents prepared and/or provided by Respondent and the New York State Department of Corrections and

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Community Supervision.

5. I make this verification in place of Mr. Fields and Mr. Garcia, because Mr. Fields and Mr. Garcia are presently incarcerated outside the county in which my office is located.

Dated: April 5, 2023

Albany, New York

Elise Czuchna, Esq.

eczuchna@plsny.org

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