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Video Footage and Reports Released in Lawsuit Expose Inhumane Treatment of People Detained at St. Louis City Jail

ST. LOUIS – Last night, in federal court, plaintiffs in a putative class action lawsuit, *Jones v. City of St. Louis*, filed a motion containing a staggering volume of evidence against the St. Louis City Justice Center (CJC), including over 360 use-of-force reports, more than 50 declarations and grievances and video footage of correctional officers macing detainees at point-blank range with “riot-sized” cannisters—often while people are restrained in handcuffs or locked in small cells. The plaintiffs are current and former detainees who allege the CJC has violated their constitutional rights by excessively macing them and depriving them of water; they’re represented by the MacArthur Justice Center, ArchCity Defenders, Rights Behind Bars, and the Saint Louis University School of Law Legal Clinics.

“This trove of documents and videos further prove what has already become evident over the years: CJC correctional officers are weaponizing chemical agents and other torture tactics in retaliation, for punitive reasons, or just because they can as an exercise of power,” MacArthur Justice Center Attorney Shubra Ohri said. “And what’s more – the city’s efforts to hide and cover up the abuse sanctions it and allows it to continue festering without accountability. The people of St. Louis deserve to know the truth about what is happening and how little is being done to stop it.”

Video and public records released in the lawsuit can be viewed [here](#). While the evidence presented is expansive, the full extent of abuse at the jail is still unclear. Currently, the City of St. Louis has not released all public records requested by the plaintiffs during discovery. In fact, City officials deleted nearly 80% of video footage responsive to the plaintiffs’ discovery requests.

Across the hundreds of incidents reported, the methods of abuse used by CJC's correctional officers are consistent. Officers use mace reflexively, often without warning, in response to any disruption or perceived inconvenience, such as detainees asking for two more minutes on the phone with their loved one or complaining about not receiving their food during mealtime. In a declaration, one detainee said officers have a rule: "spray first, ask questions later."

The City's records reveal at least 250 instances of using OC spray on detainees who are passively resistant, at least 50 instances of using OC spray on detainees who are on suicide watch, and a well-established pattern of CO's spray against detainees who are restrained in handcuffs or in their own cells. On at least 70 documented occasions, CO's maced individual detainees with "riot-sized" Sabre Red MK-9 cans – a device designed for crowds only.

OC spray utilized in large volumes and frequency can have life-threatening consequences even for those who are not its direct target, as one victim of secondhand mace describes in a [declaration](#):

"I experienced mace in my cell when it was sprayed in the wing near my cell... I suffer from various health conditions including diabetes, heart problems, blindness and a punctured lung from the police... Macing causes me to experience shortness of breath, a pounding heart, burning in my eyes and lungs. I'm afraid the mace will affect my one good eye and cause me to go totally blind. These macing incidents really make me feel like I'm a goner – I ask the Lord to let me just lay down in peace and die."

According to the lawsuit, the City has failed to take action to stop the abusive practices despite having full knowledge of the misconduct. Of the 1,241 Use of Force reports produced in this case only 9 were found to be unjustified, meaning that the City of St. Louis approves 99.93 percent of all uses of force involving mace. The City also has no policy against using chemical agents on people with medical contraindications, such as asthma.

This is not the first time the jail has come under national scrutiny for inhumane jail conditions and lack of transparency. In a [2021 uprising](#), over 100 people incarcerated at CJC left their cells and joined together to demand improved conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Advocates and detainees protested again in 2022, when [six detainees died](#) in the span of five months. And in recent months, members of the City's Detention Facilities Oversight Board have [reported](#) the jail staff's obstruction of their work, including denying requests to tour the jail.

"With this filing, we hope to bring attention to the mistreatment of our jailed citizens at the City Justice Center," said Professor Lauren Bartlett, an attorney with Saint Louis University School of Law Legal Clinics. "The system of justice for those awaiting a trial is broken and we must fix it."