

Rikers prisoner dies after NYC jailers wouldn't take him to court, refused \$1 bail payment — 'They didn't listen,' says anguished mom

by Graham Rayman



This June 20, 2014 file photo shows the Rikers Island jail complex in New York, with the Manhattan skyline in the background. (Seth Wenig/AP)

Jailed awaiting court dates on a series of misdemeanor charges, Esias Johnson told his family he saw no way out of Rikers Island — partly because his jailers would not get him to court hearings, and partly because they saw no way he could pay his \$1 bail.

Johnson, 24, was found dead Tuesday at Rikers from what sources described as a possible drug overdose. His death is raising questions about why he had languished there since Aug. 7.

“He had been talking about the court dates. He was saying, ‘I’m giving people the info and they aren’t doing what they are supposed to do. Nobody is helping me. I feel I’m going to be stuck here,’” said his mom, Tracy Johnson, 48.

“He gave them the information, and they didn’t listen to him.”

Johnson — whose family is from Haverhill, Mass. — was at Rikers far longer than he should have been because city Department

of Correction officials failed to bring him to up to three court appearances during the cruel month he languished in the island's Anna M. Kross Center, his parents say.

"We tried paying the bail online, but they said we couldn't," his mother told the Daily News. "He had commissary money and could have paid, but they said he still needed to be seen by a judge. But they weren't bringing him to court."

Esias Johnson, a Massachusetts man held on \$1 bail on a misdemeanor charge who died on Rikers Island Tuesday, Sept. 7.

Esias Johnson, a Massachusetts man held on \$1 bail on a misdemeanor charge who died on Rikers Island Tuesday, Sept. 7.

The family's lawyer Jamie Santana told The News that the failure to produce detainees for court has been a growing problem in recent months as

“As more information comes to light, his death was clearly avoidable,” Jaime Santana said. “It’s no coincidence he was the 10th inmate to die. ... It’s a bad situation there with deplorable conditions and a lack of medical care. While the system continues to play the blame game, people are dying.”

Rikers reels from a rising population and a staffing crisis that has DOC officials and the unions pointing fingers at each other.

Ten detainees have died in the system since December, a huge spike over 2019 and 2020.

“As more information comes to light, his death was clearly avoidable,” Santana said. “It’s no coincidence he was the 10th inmate to die. ... It’s a bad situation there with deplorable conditions and a lack of medical care.

While the system continues to play the blame game, people are dying.”

Johnson was arrested Aug. 6 in Forest Hills, Queens, on misdemeanor charges for slapping a straphanger on the butt on the subway, then chasing him into a bank with a syringe.

When he was being processed, cops found a misdemeanor warrant

issued June 21 by the Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office in New Jersey. Johnson allegedly sent a threatening text message to someone in Raritan Township, N.J., about 60 miles from New York.

A transcript of the arraignment shows Johnson's Legal Aid lawyer Kristie Ranchurejee requested his release pending the outcome of the two cases. "This is a misdemeanor," she said.

Assistant District Attorney Edward White asked for him to be remanded because of the warrant. Queens Criminal Court judge Denise Johnson ordered him remanded on \$1 bail without offering an explanation and set an Aug. 20 court date.

His parents expected him to be released from Rikers while the New Jersey case was pending.

"He gave them the information a week prior and they never brought him forward for that or other court dates," his mother said. "If they did, he would have been out."

A DOC spokeswoman said records show a scheduled court appearance for Aug. 20 was rescheduled for Wednesday, the day after Johnson's death. It was not clear why the hearing was delayed. His mother said Johnson expected to get out on Friday.

Esias Johnson's father Jerome Johnson said he was upset that the possibility his son overdosed leaked to the media. "He just had the autopsy (Wednesday) and we don't have the toxicology yet. It's like a pre-emptive strike to make my son look bad," the dad said.

The city Medical Examiner has yet to issue a cause of death. DOC officials are investigating.

Johnson was one of six boys born to Jerome and Tracy Johnson. He was diagnosed with Asperger's-related autism at a young age, but he excelled at his schoolwork, his parents said.

After attending a therapeutic school, he finished high school at Haverhill High because he "wanted to go as a regular kid," his mom said.

The grieving parents said Johnson often volunteered his time in Haverhill at food pantries and an organization that helps the blind. He also tutored kids after school at the Salvation Army there.

"He would dance around the city. Everyone knew him as 'Izzy.' He was infatuated with Michael Jackson, with dancing and singing," his mom said.

Several years ago, he worked as a youth

leader with Granite United Church until the church learned he was gay and cruelly kicked him out.

At the same time, he struggled with mental illness, they said.

Johnson developed a fascination with the Big Apple. “He ended up chasing the bright lights,” his mom said. “He was trying to find himself. And he had a kind of social anxiety. It was hard for him to have a normal relationship. He never harmed anyone, never hurt anyone.”

The parents said Johnson was staying at a Fairfield Inn in Queens and was involved in some kind of social services program. “He would contact us every single day. He would call me all day long,” his mom said.

On Monday, 11 elected officials and others are expected to tour Rikers and then call on the city and state to address conditions there. ■