**Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform**

Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Policy Director

NYC Council, Committee on Correction Hearing re: COVID in the Jails, September 21, 2020

Good afternoon. I am Zachary Katznelson, Policy Director at the Lippman Commission. Our formal name is the Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform. Thanks for the chance to testify.

On many levels, COVID has brought home the lesson that we must continue to move away from incarceration as much as possible.

As CHS has testified, the best way to prevent the spread of COVID in the jails is to have as few people locked up as can be. It is important to recognize the steps the Administration and many players in the system took to reduce the jail population earlier this year, though clearly more could have been done, and faster.

I’d like to focus on people serving City sentences. Commissioner Brann stated 296 people were released via the 6-A program. Comparing that number to the stats from MOCJ from the spring, it appears that almost no one has been released via 6-A in several months. We would strongly encourage the Commissioner to change that. Not only did 6-A releases undoubtedly save lives by limiting exposure to COVID, it brought down the recidivism rate by providing people with housing and wrap around services as needed.

Many of the people in the 6-A program had several previous convictions. As one service provider described it to me, some were effectively serving life sentences, one misdemeanor at a time. They would be subjected to trauma and violence at Rikers, not provided adequate services there or in the community, and just cycle in and out of jail.

The 6-A program is proving significantly more effective: re-arrest rates for people released via 6-A were just over half that of others released from Rikers. And for far less money. Housing someone and providing them with treatment and support services can cost about $50,000-$75,000 per year, depending on the level of need. The cost of Rikers for a year is now roughly $500,000 per person. So, the 100 people serving City sentences today are costing taxpayers $50 million per year. Is that really the best use of our resources?

Also, before COVID, the Administration promised to permanently move people with serious mental and physical health problems out of the jails and into City hospitals. Even though that would also help reduce the jail population and take the most medically vulnerable people out of the path of potential COVID infection, the process is stalled. We would urge the Council to press the City to move forward on this front.

Let's take the lessons learned through COVID and permanently revamp our reliance on incarceration. Not only will it help save lives from illness in the short-term, it will significantly improve outcomes for people charged with crimes or serving City sentences, and in turn save future victims from being harmed. And all for a fraction of the cost of Rikers. That's the necessary path forward. Thank you.