

# A MORE JUST NYC

## Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

### Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Policy Director NYC Council, Committee on Criminal Justice, October 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.

I was speaking several weeks ago with a doctor who spent years providing mental health treatment at Rikers. I asked him: what is the number one thing that your patients need coming out of jail? I expected him to say continuity of care, which of course he thought was critically important. 51% of men incarcerated in our City jails and a full 85% of women held there have mental illness. For many people, jail was the first place they got anything approaching decent mental health care, even though it could hardly be less conducive to treatment. But the doctor said the number one thing people actually need when they are released is housing. Without housing, proper mental health treatment is incredibly difficult. And without access to treatment, re-entry becomes immeasurably harder. And without both, the chances of a return to jail become much, much greater.

But we have some excellent examples in this City of how to do better.

Take 6-A. Like so many people at Rikers, many of the people in the 6-A program faced numerous hurdles at re-entry: mental illness, substance use issues, previous convictions, and homelessness. Yet when given housing and services, their re-arrest rates were cut almost in half compared to people released from Rikers without housing and services. And that was based on a program thrown together on the fly during the early days of the pandemic.

The Women's Community Justice Project shows what a more established program can achieve. Since 2017, WCJP has provided housing and services to women who had been jailed at Rikers pending trial for a wide range of alleged crimes. Of over 200 women served, most of whom battle mental illness and substance use, only 2 were charged with new crimes.

And in neither program are people exposed to the same brutality and trauma as they would be at Rikers.

All this is not just more humane and effective – it also costs far less money than jailing people. 6-A, in part because it is an emergency program, costs \$50,000-\$75,000 per person per year. At WCJP, with more lead time to plan, the average per person cost is around \$30,000 per year. The average cost of Rikers for a year is now roughly \$500,000 per person.

As we seek a smarter, more just path to public safety and an end to the racial and moral injustice of Rikers, these programs and others like them are lighting the way. Please fund them.

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One other note: in the 2019 Points of Agreement that was part of the vote to close Rikers, the City committed to establishing 380 additional supportive housing units for people with justice involvement. None of those beds have actually come on-line, and none seem to be on the horizon – there were no acceptable bids to the City’s RFP. Given all the excellent organizations that provide supportive housing in the City, how is this possible? I would ask the Council to delve into this and help figure out why not.

Thank you.