

A MORE JUST NYC

Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director
New York City Council Committee on Criminal Justice, November 22, 2021

I am Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, often known as the Lippman Commission after our chair, former Chief Judge of the State of New York Jonathan Lippman. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

Getting off Rikers could not be more urgent. We have to do all we can to close Rikers sooner than the mandatory legal deadline of August 2027. Demolition on the old jails is set to start early next year. Now we need urgency in getting RFPs for the new jails out the door and shovels in the ground.

Meanwhile, there are four steps our City should take that can minimize the scope of the new jails – and achieve greater safety and better outcomes for us all.

First, bring online as many supportive housing beds as we can as quickly as possible. This will better lives and prevent crime before it happens. Mayor-Elect Adams' plan to convert empty hotels to supportive housing is an excellent one that should be sped forward.

Second, maximize the number of secure beds in City hospitals, so people with serious mental illness (and other serious health needs) can get the care they need, not be stuck in destabilizing jails. Every hospital bed can mean one fewer bed needed in the borough jails – and again with a better outcome. Mayor de Blasio has pledged almost 400 secure hospital beds in the next few years. But there are almost 1,000 people at Rikers with serious mental illness. We could use more beds and we need them more quickly.

Third, there are three empty or mostly empty state-controlled prisons in Manhattan that could be transferred to the City and remodeled. Here too, any beds we get can mean smaller borough-based jails – and better results.

If we can convert one prison to a trauma-informed care facility for women, the new Queens jail can be shrunk by roughly 15%.

If we can convert the other two prisons to therapeutic facilities for people with serious mental illness, we can shrink all the borough-based jails by 10%.

Finally, it's essential that we increase funding for groups like Exodus and the Women's Community Justice Project, which have been doing excellent work providing housing and services for people diverted from Rikers. This has resulted in far better individual outcomes, and far lower recidivism numbers.

Thank you again for the chance to testify.