

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
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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 the opportunity to testify.

Rikers is a terrible investment. New York City spends more on jails than anywhere else in the country, yet violence rates dwarf those elsewhere. Almost no one leaves Rikers better off than when they went in – not staff, not incarcerated people. Most of the people hurt by Rikers are Black or Latinx. Closing Rikers could not be more urgent.

Almost 90% of the people at Rikers are pre-trial and are meant to get a speedy trial. Yet, 1,500 people have been in jail over a year waiting for their day in court. That incarceration alone has cost City taxpayers at least \$750 million.

We can take safe, smart steps to avoid crime and incarceration in the first place, and safely lower the jail population to a level DOC can manage. The return on investment will be tremendous.

Take supportive housing. The Corporation for Supportive Housing has calculated that every year, over 2,500 people who need supportive housing instead cycle in and out of the violence and chaos at Rikers. A supportive housing bed costs \$42,000 per year. Rikers costs over \$500,000 per year – and a victim may well already have been hurt. The City should significantly increase its investment in supportive housing, including proven women and gender-expansive programs like SHERO.

To safely lower the jail population, the City should establish and fund Population Review Teams made up of senior representatives of every justice agency. Borough by borough, case by case, the teams would collaboratively examine whether people in Rikers can be safely released, with conditions and support, or whether their cases can be resolved. Around the country, review teams have safely brought down jail populations while ensuring fairness and accountability.

Meanwhile, the *Nunez* Monitor tells us DOC does not have enough skilled, effective leadership teams to safely run the 9 currently operating jails (8 on Rikers plus the Boat). At the same time, some of the Rikers jails are well-below capacity. Therefore, the budget should support closure of the most decrepit and dangerous jails on Rikers and consolidation into fewer facilities. Violence would drop. Work conditions and officer morale would improve. Service delivery would increase. We would save millions on maintenance and overtime.

Finally, we have to keep pressing forward on the borough jails. Without rebuilt borough jails, we will not close Rikers. In addition to being closer to family, services, and courts, the jails also

make financial sense.

The bonds to build the borough jail system will cost \$575 million per year. Compare that to the \$2.6 billion per year the City spends to run DOC today. Once we have the new jails in place, we can slash DOC operating costs by almost \$2 billion.

Rebuilding on Rikers would cost up to 15% more than borough jails, and take years longer. The reason: demolition and construction on an isolated former garbage dump plagued by methane and asbestos, while having to work around an active jail complex, is incredibly challenging and expensive. New jails on Rikers would also do nothing to address the isolation that allowed the lawlessness and lack of accountability at Rikers to fester for decades.

Borough jails are the only realistic chance we have to close Rikers this generation. They are on pace and on schedule. That must continue.

Thank you again for the chance to testify.