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Op-ed: Gutting essential services will endanger lives further on Rikers

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Rikers Island remains in a state of crisis. [Recent reports](#) from a federal monitor have raised deeply worrying concerns about New York City's ability to protect incarcerated people and jail staff. Unfortunately, looming cuts to re-entry and therapeutic programs in the jails threaten to further destabilize the profoundly troubled jails.

Last month, the New York City Department of Correction announced it is terminating the contracts of six nonprofit service providers by July 1. This would effectively eliminate programs that serve over 1,500 people daily in the city's jails. The programs on the chopping block cover 179 housing units, including units for people with mental illness and those in protective custody.

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The Department has emphasized that these contracts are not being ended because of performance, but rather are the consequence of the mayoral directive that [city agencies reduce their budgets by 4%](#). The cuts were made alongside the unrealistic pledge that several dozen DOC programming staff, who already have full-time responsibilities, will somehow absorb the workload of almost 100 nonprofit employees who provide thousands of hours of programming each week.

If the Adams administration is serious about cost savings, the best path is to [close Rikers](#)

Island altogether. While delays threaten the timeline for closure, the costs—both human and fiscal—of staying open are painfully clear.

According to the Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform and the Institute for State and Local Governance, the city will save \$1.3 billion annually by closing Rikers, even when accounting for inflation and the cost of building and operating the borough-based jails that, along with secure hospital beds, will replace Rikers.

But we hardly have to wait until Rikers closes to realize smart savings.

A first step would be right-sizing the city's jails, starting with the correctional workforce. The DOC is budgeted for over 7,000 uniformed staff and almost 9,000 total staff for a jail population of just over 6,000. No other jail system in the country even comes close to this kind of staffing ratio. There are hundreds of vacant uniformed positions that could be eliminated, saving over \$100 million. Controlling overtime should also be a top priority, which last year cost \$260 million.

Hanging cost savings on cuts to nonprofit contracts—part of the 5% of DOC's budget spent on programming, services and nutrition—is short-sighted.

The city can also safely lower the jail population, allowing DOC to close jails and consolidate operations. This is a vital element of the City Council's adopted plan to close Rikers. Special attention should be paid to the 53% of the jail population with a mental illness and the 40% of people entering jail who say they actively use illicit drugs and/or excessively drink. People whom Mayor Adams has said need treatment, not jail.

Fortunately, we have excellent programs in New York City that we can scale up to increase safety.

By removing barriers to access, we can **expand supportive housing** opportunities for the more than 2,500 people annually who cycle into Rikers with serious mental illness, addiction issues and no stable housing. Supportive housing—affordable housing with wrap-around services—has been proven to cut incarceration among individuals who cycle in and out of jail frequently by 40%.

Enhancing pre-trial supervised release will allow case-management providers to better serve thousands of program participants with high needs who are repeatedly arrested. The Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice estimates that enhancing supervised release can cut recidivism among this population by 30% to 50%.

All justice system stakeholders have to move cases more quickly. It is shameful—and puts a ridiculous burden on DOC—that criminal cases in New York City take three times the national average to resolve. It certainly doesn't serve victims. The Independent Commission projects that speeding up cases to align with New York state standards would mean about 1,400 fewer people in jail today—with absolutely zero detriment to public safety.

DOC's budget is bloated, with an annual spending level of almost \$500,000 for every person in custody. That's five to 10 times the amount spent by the other largest jail systems in the country.

But there are better approaches to reducing these massive costs than taking a hatchet to the nonprofit providers who provide conflict resolution, discharge planning, employment readiness, cognitive behavioral therapy and other critical re-entry-focused programs.

To save lives, New York City must restore the cuts to programming in city jails and commit to smart investments that reduce the jail population and advance the closure of Rikers Island altogether. That is the only path to a safe, just and equitable city, and the only path that makes fiscal sense.

Michael Jacobson is executive director of the Institute of State and Local Governance, and a sociology professor at the CUNY Graduate Center. He was previously New York City correction commissioner, probation commissioner and a deputy budget director in the New York City Office of Management and Budget. **Dana Kaplan** is a senior advisor to the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform and a recent Art for Justice Fellow.