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Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director
New York City Council Committee on Criminal Justice
Hearing on Self-Harm and Suicide Prevention in City Jails
April 29, 2022

Good morning. 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.

Like so many things at Rikers, when it comes to preventing self-harm and suicides, the problem is not primarily DOC's written policies and directives. The failures lie in the inability to properly train staff, and then to provide adequate support and accountability to ensure staff implement what's on paper.

Suicide prevention training isn't happening consistently because when posts are going unstaffed and officers have to work extra shifts, how can COs be pulled out of the jails to be trained? Supervisors aren't getting strong management training, and too many are assigned to desk jobs when they are needed in housing areas as leaders and mentors.

Then there is the bigger reality: Rikers cannot safely manage almost 5,500 incarcerated people, or safely run 9 different jails. We need to safely lower the jail population, so DOC can consolidate operations.

That should start by focusing on the over 1,400 people who have been in City jails for over a year pre-trial. 64% of men in that group have a mental illness, as do 96% of the women. We have to speed up their cases.

A pilot project in Brooklyn by the Center for Court Innovation resolved 68% more cases within six months – without sacrificing fairness, just by doing things like ensuring less time between court dates. It would take only \$600,000 to expand that pilot citywide. That's not much more than the cost of holding one person at Rikers for a year, and hundreds would be helped.

The City should also expedite the 400 secure beds in H+H facilities being built for people in jail with serious illnesses, and explore additional capacity. People with mental illness should be getting care, not Rikers.

Supportive housing is key here too, so people with mental illness never get arrested in the first place. Thank you, Chair Rivera, to you and your colleagues for pushing to increase funding. Another needed step is reforming the City regulation that says people who have been at Rikers for more than 90 days are no longer homeless, making them ineligible for supportive housing.

I would also like to note our support for Intros [30](#) and [181](#). The need for care does not stop when the jails go into lock-down, so better communication and transparency is critical. The Council may want to specify in Intro 30 that it is referring to *emergency* lock-ins, not just any lock-in. Also important is public access to DOC's policies and directives. For instance, the directive on lock-ins that Intro 30 would impact is not publicly available. That should change.

Thank you.