

A MORE JUST NYC

Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

Testimony of Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director

New York City Council Budget Hearing

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Good afternoon. 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. I would like to speak about Rikers Island and investments that can be made to make it safer for everyone.

As we all know, lives on Rikers are at grave risk – staff and incarcerated people alike. The Council can help ease the crisis, even as the City moves forward with the essential steps needed to close Rikers forever.

Rikers cannot safely handle the number of people who are locked up. *Safely* lowering the population will allow DOC to close jails and consolidate operations. Fewer operating jails will mean fewer officers are needed on any given shift. Overtime will drop. DOC might actually be able to ensure they have staff in every housing area, and enough officers available to get people to medical appointments.

This is not about opening the gates. It's about safely and smartly lowering the jail population.

First, please continue to support increased funding for supportive housing – affordable housing with wrap-around services for people with serious mental illness and drug addiction. Overall, the Corporation for Supportive Housing estimates each year over 2,500 people enter Rikers who need supportive housing. Incarcerating them costs well over \$1 billion per year. Providing them with supportive housing would cost just over \$100 million per year. Which is the better investment?

Second, 90% of people at Rikers are locked up pre-trial. 1,400 have been jailed for over a year waiting for a trial. 64% of men in that group have a mental illness, as do 96% of the women. Every week those people are kept in what might be the most dangerous, expensive waiting room in the world costs NYC taxpayers over \$13 million.

A pilot project in Brooklyn led by the Center for Court Innovation increased the number of cases of people in Rikers that were resolved within 6 months by 70%. For \$600,000, that pilot could be expanded citywide. The Lippman Commission projects that expanding the pilot could reduce the jail population by 1,000 people. Fewer people will languish in Rikers for years. Fewer victims will wait endlessly to know if the person accused of harming them is actually guilty, and if so, will be held accountable. Safety and justice would be advanced.

Third, fund the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice to spearhead Population Review Teams. These are teams used successfully around the country which bring together 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 monitoring, conditions, and support, or whether their cases can be resolved. We project this could reduce the Rikers population by hundreds of people – again, safely.

Thank you.