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Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

Testimony of Stanley Richards for the City Council

September 5, 2019

My name is Stanley Richards. When I was younger, I spent about ten years behind bars for the harms I caused, including two years on Rikers Island. When I came home from prison, I dedicated myself to helping people like me succeed on a different path. Today, I am the Executive Vice President of the Fortune Society, Vice-Chair of the New York City's Board of Correction, and a member of the Lippman Commission.

I know the hell of Rikers and I know it has to be closed as soon as possible. Every day it stays open is a day our loved ones and neighbors are harmed. That goes for the people who are incarcerated there – almost all of whom are people of color – and the people who work there, most of whom are people of color too.

We need drastic action to change the dynamics of the jails and we cannot wait. Shutting Rikers and replacing it with a borough-based system is our best chance to get a handle on the unacceptable level of violence in the jails and to hold everyone accountable. With a much smaller system, so much of the money we now spend on the Department of Correction can be invested in our communities, schools, mental health, substance dependence, and diversion programs. We must do all we can so people never go to jail in the first place.

Then, let's use Rikers for good. Imagine putting green infrastructure out there. We could close the power plants in Queens and the Bronx that spew out pollution and hurt our children. We could stop thousands of gallons of human waste from flowing into the water around our communities every time it rains a lot. Imagine how we could grow and thrive.

The City's jail plan is not perfect, so we look forward to working with you and the Administration to improve it. The time now is our best chance to make sure that Rikers – and the Barge – close forever. If this plan fails, those jails will be with us for a generation or more. That cannot happen. Please vote in favor of the plan.

Thank you.