

# A MORE JUST NYC

## Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

### City Council Hearing Testimony of Michael Jacobson

September 5, 2019

My name is Michael Jacobson. I am writing in support of the plan to close Rikers and create a borough based system of detention.

I served as the Commissioner of the Department of Correction from 1995-1998, where I was responsible for overseeing New York City's jails, including the jail complex on Rikers Island. Since then, I have served as President of the Vera Institute of Justice and, currently, as Executive Director of the CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. I am also a member of the Independent Commission on NYC Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform, commonly referred to as the Lippman Commission.

My experience as Correction Commissioner convinced me that the Rikers jails should be shut down forever, and that a much-smaller set of jails in the boroughs represent our best chance to close an abysmal chapter in New York City's history.

Most of the buildings on Rikers are decaying and incredibly poorly designed structures that create safety hazards and inhumane conditions for the people who work on Rikers and those who are incarcerated there.

But beyond these physical issues is its isolation. For a jailed person, a visit from the outside is a lifeline that improves behavior inside the jail and when that person returns home. But the inaccessibility of Rikers makes visiting difficult or even impossible for many family members and other loved ones. Service providers and lawyers, whose work can be so important to a detained person's chances in court and when returning home, also have difficulty traveling to and working on Rikers. Perhaps most importantly, the isolation has a real symbolic and psychological toll, fostering impunity, hopelessness, and inhumanity.

In many ways, Rikers Island is a modern-day penal colony. I believe that better-designed borough jails with many fewer people locked up provide a chance for a smaller and more humane detention system—one that is based on dignity—that simply cannot be achieved on Rikers Island. Borough-based jails, while obviously not cheap, would save enormous amounts of money over the long run—we calculated savings of more than \$500 million each year. They would also be much less expensive than rebuilding on Rikers – which would cost at least \$2 billion *more*.

This plan to close Rikers has the added benefit of providing the city with a 420-acre parcel of land such as it will never see again. The potential re-use of Rikers Island for all sorts of essential economic development, infrastructure, and regional transportation issues will be a huge benefit for New York City in the decades to come.

The land use process for the City's proposed facilities raises many complicated issues that you must review and consider. I ask that as you do so, you also consider the opportunity and imperative to put an end to the Rikers jails.