



The Fortune Society
Prisoner Re-Entry
CHANGING MINDS & BUILDING LIVES

Testimony Before the City Council: April 25, 2006

Re: City Jails

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is JoAnne Page, and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Fortune Society.

Since our founding in 1967, the Fortune Society has served as a primary resource for New York City men and women released from jail and prison and seeking to build constructive lives in the community. Currently, we serve between 4,000 and 5,000 former prisoners each year, offering a holistic and integrated “one-stop-shopping” model of service provision that has achieved national recognition. Services currently provided included outpatient substance abuse treatment, alternatives to incarceration, HIV services, career development and job retention, education, family services and supportive housing as well as ongoing access to aftercare. In addition to our services in the community, we have office space at Rikers Island, serving family members and prisoners at the point of release.

Under Commissioner Horn’s administration, we and our sister human service agencies have had unprecedented access to those locked up on Rikers Island as well as unprecedented support in providing releasees with meaningful discharge planning. Commissioner Horn deserves much credit for the changes he has made, and the changes he is currently working to institute. But Rikers Island itself is not a reason for pride.

Rikers Island is the largest penal colony in the world: visitors flying into New York and circling over our beautiful city see alternating views of Rikers Island and of the Statue of Liberty.

As Commissioner Horn has recognized, there is something very wrong about isolating so many poor people of color on an island so inaccessible to their families and communities. At Fortune, we see the struggle of family members to visit their loved ones on Rikers Island, a struggle especially difficult for those who must bring small children with them or who are elderly or disabled. We also hear from our clients about how difficult the prisoner transportation process is from Rikers Island to court and back again. Providing services to men and women incarcerated on Rikers Island is enormously costly in terms of staff time, and referrals to sister agencies are often stymied by such agencies’ unwillingness to travel to Rikers Island to conduct needed interviews. Defense attorneys must budget at least half a day to see a client at Rikers Island, and this often means that no attorney visit occurs for detainees, except for moments of conversation in the court pens just before or after a defendant’s case is called.

For these reasons, the proposal to lock up prisoners in the boroughs instead of at Rikers Island makes much sense and would be in prisoners’ interests: they would be closer to their families and attorneys, closer to the courts, and have better access to service providers.

The big concern with re-opening closed borough correctional facilities or opening up new ones is a very simple one: doing so might mean increasing New York City's incarceration capacity. Will opening a jail bed in Brooklyn or in the Bronx mean closing a jail bed in Rikers Island, or will it simply mean leaving the same capacity at Rikers Island and adding capacity in the boroughs as well? And if a commitment is made today to close beds at Rikers and move prisoners to borough houses, will that commitment hold in future?

There is no reasonable relationship between crime rates and incarceration rates. Nationwide, as crime rates have fallen, incarceration rates have risen, driven by political pressure and sentencing policy and practice. Over the last 11 years, the New York State crime rate has declined by 47.9%, faster than that in the rest of the country, and although our prison and jail populations have declined in recent years, their decline has been far less than the decline in crime.

Locking up people unnecessarily is damaging and expensive both in dollars and in human suffering. At an estimated full cost of \$252 per prisoner per day, according to a 2002 study by the New York City Independent Budget Office, it is indeed financially expensive. The human consequences include can include psychological and physical injury, loss of housing, loss of benefits, loss of employment and breaking of family ties.

Some 25% of City prisoners are released within three days of admission and more than 50% are released within 14 days. Most are detainees, innocent under the law, who cannot make what are often very low bails. Those who are sentenced as short-stayers are individuals whose crimes and/or criminal histories are not felt to warrant more serious sentences. One cannot help but ask the question of whether such men and women should be locked up in the first place – far less expensive and damaging alternatives are available to address the need to ensure that detainees show up for court and to see that those convicted of very minor crimes have their cases disposed of appropriately. Given the prevalence of substance abuse, mental illness and homelessness among those convicted of very low-level offenses, and the knowledge that just over one third of all jail releasees will be re-incarcerated within a year of release and two out of three will be arrested again within three years, our policies of incarcerating those whom we feel pose little risk to community safety should be strongly challenged. At a time when Fortune and other agencies are successfully providing alternatives to state prison for individuals charged with far more serious crimes, it is ironic that so many minor offenders are spending short periods of jail time.

It makes sense to incarcerate men and women closer to home, as long as we are absolutely and permanently closing at least one jail bed at Rikers Island for each new one that is opened in a borough facility. I would recommend that, at the same time, we look at the degree to which the short-term stayer population and other prisoners appropriate for release are filling jail beds unnecessarily, and develop policies that would let us close down additional jail beds by offering needed services and appropriate alternatives to incarceration and detention.

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