

A MORE JUST NYC

Independent Rikers Commission

Testimony of Executive Director Zachary Katznelson
Before NYS Senate Standing Committee on Alcoholism & Substance Use Disorders
October 10, 2025

Good morning. I am Zachary Katznelson, Executive Director of the Independent Rikers Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The Independent Rikers Commission, which is chaired by former Chief Judge of the State of New York Jonathan Lippman, is made up of 40 civic leaders from across the spectrum of politics and background, including corrections, law enforcement, victims' services, the business community, the judiciary, healthcare, service provision, and formerly incarcerated people. In late 2023, the Commission was re-appointed by NYC Council Speaker Adrienne Adams to re-examine and refresh the plan to close the dysfunctional, decrepit, dangerous jail complex on Rikers Island. In March of this year, our Commission released a [comprehensive blueprint](#) of proven policies and investments that charts a path to safely and permanently close Rikers as soon as possible.

Among its many flaws and challenges, Rikers and its staff are ill-equipped to provide consistent, adequate mental health, drug, and alcohol treatment. Rikers is the third largest psychiatric facility in the entire country. Last year, 900 people passed through Rikers who were so severely ill they could not comprehend what was happening in court. People so ill they were meant to be in State hospitals – but there is no room there, so they are stuck for weeks and months at Rikers. But, people at Rikers miss 40% of their scheduled mental health appointments, most often because they are not brought to clinics by correction officers.

Egregiously, a whistleblower exposed a practice at Rikers called “deadlocking.” Officers have shut severely mentally ill people in their cells for days and weeks straight, often without access to medication or treatment. People have profoundly decompensated, including smearing their cells with feces. And most of these people come straight out, right back to our communities. Destabilized, traumatized.

That's also true for the 25% of people at Rikers with opioid addiction, and the 30% addicted to alcohol. There's just one sober living unit at Rikers. And even if people get treatment inside, too often, they are not properly connected with continuing treatment after their release.

The end result is missed opportunity after missed opportunity. We all feel the ripple effects of these failures.

I should note that Rikers' impact and its neglect have long been disproportionate. 85% of uniformed staff are Black or Latino. 90% of incarcerated people are Black or Latino.

New Yorkers deserve a better, smarter, safer path. Legislation like the Treatment Jail Expansion Act is a key part of how we can achieve that.

Our Commission strongly supports expanding eligibility for and the capacity of treatment courts. We particularly support provisions to give judges maximum flexibility in tailoring solutions to meet the profile of the person before them, harmonizing treatment and accountability. We hope remaining issues with the bill can be resolved very soon.

Yet, expanded treatment courts will need help to maximize their chance of success. Our State and City should work together to fill critical gaps in the continuum of care. For instance, for people with serious mental illness, the biggest factor in whether they might commit a violent crime is whether they have co-occurring substance use. Yet, there is only one residential program in all of New York City specializing in treating this population, Harbor House. It has a months-long waiting list. That has to change.

I want to close by noting that legislation like this – and the community-based investments that will make treatment courts a true success – answer the call of a strong majority of New Yorkers. In polling and focus groups by our Commission, New York City residents across the board overwhelmingly support investments just like this. That is especially true of crime victims. Last year, we spoke to over 1,100 victims in NYC. They made clear they want to be sure the person that harmed them never hurts anyone else again. And if the person needs treatment, they want them to have it. In fact, victims were four times more likely to favor increased mental health and drug treatment over more use of jail and prison. Four times.

As we work together to leave the ugly failures of Rikers behind and move toward a smarter, safer system that all New Yorkers can be proud of, legislation like this holds tremendous promise. Our Commission looks forward to working together on this and related efforts.

Thank you.