

RESPONSES FROM SHAUN DONOVAN

MAYORAL FORUM: CLOSING RIKERS ISLAND

Do you support closing Rikers Island by or before August 31, 2027, and reducing total citywide jail capacity to 3,300 or less by that time? Would you like to provide more context on your above response?

Yes. New Yorkers deserve to live in a city that is safe, inclusive, and equitable for everyone. And yet, protests against racial injustice, repeated instances of unjustified police force, tragic increases in gun violence, and the longstanding over-representation of people of color and individuals with mental health challenges in our courts and jails demonstrate that the current system is not working as it should.

The way forward is to reimagine a public safety system that is accountable and community-driven, reduce over-policing and over-incarceration, and reinvest in services that provide safe and healthy communities for all New Yorkers. Closing the jails on Rikers Island is an essential part of this vision, because the location and condition of the jails there contribute to the dysfunction, inhumanity, and incredible costs to the City—nearly \$500,000 per incarcerated person per year. Closing Rikers is the only acceptable path forward for our city and a smaller, more humane, more accessible, more accountable jail system will ultimately save lives, as well as hundreds of millions of dollars each year, if not more, that will be reinvested in communities.

Do you support moving forward with the Renewable Rikers plan? If so, how will you ensure the transfer of land from DOC to DCAS as quickly as possible?

The closure of the notorious Rikers jail complex is a much-needed and long-awaited step towards a more fair and equitable city. As the jails close, it is time to plan for the island's future as a resource for public good, particularly to benefit communities that have been most impacted by mass incarceration. Shaun believes New York City's new green economy must not replicate the low-wage, low-benefit, low-unionized, discriminatory past and he is committed to turning the island into a physical manifestation of environmental justice. We will work with stakeholders citywide to ensure it becomes a cornerstone of community development and Just Transition for uses like green energy, a 21st century wastewater treatment facility to clean our water, composting, and possibly even new public space. Achieving this could help find creative, win-win-win solutions for communities, the economy, and the environment in places where it facilitates permanently dismantling carbon or waste infrastructure.

Moving towards this future will begin as soon as we take office. We will transfer parts of the island that are no longer in public use to DCAS and potentially other agencies and will begin repurposing them for better uses as soon as possible.

How will you address dangerous and dehumanizing conditions on Rikers Island & in the existing borough jails?

Our approach to incarceration will be based on two premises. First, the system of incarceration that we have is closely linked to racial injustice in our society, including the decades-long legacy of disinvestment and discrimination in these same neighborhoods. The numbers are shameful and staggering: 90% of the people at Rikers today are Black or Latinx.

Second, incarceration should be reserved only for the most necessary cases. Putting people in jail can do serious harm to them, their families, and communities, and is often counterproductive. Removing people from their lives, work, educational opportunities, and family, and subjecting them to the chaos and brutality of Rikers, usually only worsens the problems that led them into trouble in the first place.

Shaun's administration will focus on ensuring that jail is used only as a last resort, in situations where there are no other alternatives. And for those who are incarcerated, we will recognize that nearly everyone who is locked up, even those accused of the most serious charges, will ultimately return to their communities. To this end, we will stop solitary confinement and reorient the culture and operations of our jails. We will be committed to the safety, health, and welfare of the staff and people who are confined in jail.

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During the peak of the pandemic, Rikers Island held about 3,800 individuals thanks to a citywide effort to rapidly decarcerate jails and protect our communities from COVID19. As of January 2021, the population had risen above 5,400 people in custody. How will you as Mayor of New York City reduce the average daily jail population during your first year in office? Overall, what are your top three priorities for reducing the jail population?

We know from experience over the past two decades that we can do this and keep the City safe. We will invest in communities and programs to prevent violence and instability, work with the DAs and courts so that only the most serious cases result in incarceration, and build mental health resources and capacity so that we stop using our jails as a warehouse for impoverished people with mental illness. We will advocate for policies in Albany that advance these priorities, including parole reform so that people are no longer jailed for allegations of non-criminal, technical violations of parole rules.

Last year, the number of women, trans and gender non-conforming individuals on Rikers Island was less than 180 for several months. How will your administration continue to significantly reduce the number of women in detention, and close the Rose M Singer Center before 2027?

Putting people in jail can do serious harm to them, their families, and communities, and is often counterproductive-- and this is particularly true for women who are so often responsible for providing childcare and other crucial needs for their families and communities.

Shaun's administration will focus on ensuring that jail is used only as a last resort, including for women, and will invest in alternative programs and opportunities for women who are justice-involved to help avoid incarceration.

Do you believe NYC can and should eliminate all incarceration of people with serious mental health needs? If so, how would you achieve this?

People with mental illness are 16 times more likely to die in a police encounter, and in New York City, at least 16 people with mental illness have been killed by the police in the last five years alone. More than half of the people jailed at Rikers have a mental health treatment need, and nearly 20% have a serious mental illness.

In order to ensure that New Yorkers are getting the help they need in moments of crisis, we must move mental health response entirely into the domain of public health and away from law enforcement, and we must adjust City resources accordingly.

This means creating a dedicated mental health crisis hotline to divert calls from 911 and investing in frontline mental health crisis resources to respond to these emergencies, including social workers, counselors, and emergency medical technicians. This effort would follow the example of successful, decades-old models like CAHOOTS in Oregon, where in ~25,000 mental health crisis calls in 2019, only 150 (0.6%) required law enforcement back up. This approach would expand and improve the city's mobile crisis teams as first steps toward a longer-term and holistic approach that goes beyond traditional crisis intervention. By the end of Shaun's first term, police will no longer be the default response to mental health emergencies.

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We must also invest in community-based housing and support programs to build on crisis response. People in crisis often need transitional and supportive housing programs, primary health care, community-based mental health and social services like Fountain House, help with substance abuse challenges as a next step to help stabilize during and after a crisis, and the creation of on-ramps to longer-term recovery. These programs must be sure to focus on those too often unheard and unseen, like the elderly, who have specific mental health needs.

We also will expand funding for mental health and addiction Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) programs and pre-trial diversion programs, and commit to priority decarceration of Riker's Island for people with mental health conditions, especially serious mental illness.

We will address the failures of the federal government to provide federal funds for needed inpatient psychiatric treatment, which is only one part of the needed multifaceted response to people in crisis. In the meantime, we will work with the State to establish a Mental Health Care Crisis Response Fund to cover this inpatient psychiatric care deficit as we advocate for federal reform.

How will you recruit, assess, and select judicial appointees, particularly those who sit in criminal courts?

We will seek out judicial appointees who are fair, thoughtful, and independent, and who reflect our City's diversity and understand that our justice system has to work for everyone.

Many candidates have said that they would defund the NYPD. Decarceration advocates have also pointed to bloated operations budgets of other law enforcement agencies, including District Attorneys, and the Department of Correction, which employs 8 times more officers per incarcerated person than the national average, and twice the number of officers per incarcerated person recommended by the Lippman Commission's research. Will you reduce DOC's annual operating budget? If yes, by how much, and over what period of time?

We will use police and incarceration as last resorts and will focus on solutions that get at the heart of New Yorkers' needs, empowering our residents instead of obstructing their paths toward better lives.

As a starting point, we will invest at least \$500 million annually in these solutions, including community- and health-based anti-violence efforts, reentry and supportive housing programs, and other initiatives aimed at providing communities with the resources to build safe neighborhoods. These investments will be funded primarily through savings from reduced corrections and police spending.

These initial commitments will set the floor for a broader effort to direct roughly \$3 billion—at least 20% of our City's public safety budget—to community-focused initiatives that advance public safety and racial justice, guided by a process of public input and an advisory committee that will include directly impacted people and community representatives.

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Since 2015, the Department of Correction has been under a Federal monitor for its excessive use of force and failure to hold staff accountable for abusing their power. The Monitor's most recent report stated that "The City and Department have established a record of non-compliance," and the Department is now under a remedial order. How will you bring the Department into compliance?

Reorienting the culture and operations of the jails has to be a high priority in the immediate term, even as we seek to close Rikers over the long run, and the current Mayor has failed to do so. Shaun will appoint a Commissioner and leadership team at DOC who understand this imperative and will hold them accountable for results.

Local Law 193, passed in October 2019, established a commission to make recommendations on reinvestment in communities most impacted by mass incarceration. At least half of the commissioners will be formerly incarcerated leaders. How will you support the work of this commission and implement their recommendations?

Crime and violence are caused primarily by cycles of trauma, systemic absence of opportunity, and lack of legitimacy of governing institutions. As we reimagine New York as a city that works for everyone, reduce barriers to equal opportunity, and reinvest in initiatives that are truly constructive, the safety and stability of our neighborhoods has to be a top priority. This begins with actively involving our neighborhoods in creating real public safety, as well as focusing on long-term solutions to the underlying causes of violence.

The best way to accomplish these goals is to invest in the programs and services that build stability, address health needs, and provide opportunity to community members, including community members who are returning from jail and prison.

The Reinvestment Commission will be an important part of policymaking in this area given the expertise and lived experience of its members, particularly its formerly incarcerated leaders.

Have you ever been detained on Rikers? Have you ever visited loved ones on Rikers? If elected, would you visit Rikers and each of the borough jails, unannounced, and meet with survivors of Rikers before making any decision to deviate from existing plans to close them?

I have not been detained on Rikers or visited loved ones there. That is one major reason why, if elected, I will visit jails on Rikers and in the boroughs. Before making major decisions related to the jails, I will meet with people who have been incarcerated and ensure that my administration is taking their experience and perspective into account.

The majority of people incarcerated in City jails retain the right to vote. How will you ensure the Board of Elections and all agency staff uphold these rights and improve access to voting for people in custody?

Voting is what makes our democracy work, and it is crucial for everyone in this City to be able to vote--which is why I support Our City, Our Vote which expands voting rights so legal permanent residents and those with work authorizations. When it comes to the jails, I will direct the DOC to work with BOE and nonprofits to help register incarcerated people to vote and provide them with full access to the polls.