

RESPONSES FROM SCOTT STRINGER

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?

I am proud to have been the first citywide elected official to call for the closure of the jails on Rikers Island, and to have built a long-standing partnership with the Close Rikers coalition. I have always thought that the City's 10-year timeline to close Rikers was far too elongated, and that we should be moving much faster to eliminate what is effectively an ongoing humanitarian crisis in our city. I have supported calls in the past to get the job done in three years instead of 10, but obviously this administration has failed to move with any real urgency. As Mayor, you can be sure I will expedite the completion of Rikers shut-down to the greatest extent possible. And by advancing a comprehensive set of strategies to decarcerate and fund public health investments, there will be no need for the mammoth new jails proposed by the Mayor.

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?

Yes, I support the Renewable Rikers plan as a matter of racial and environmental justice. I am very proud to have earned the endorsement of Councilmember Costa Constantinides, who knows that as Mayor I will put his visionary Renewable Rikers Plan into action by beginning the transformation of Rikers Island from a cruel monument to injustice, into a hub of urban sustainability. I will make it a priority of my administration to reduce the incarcerated population on Rikers Island quickly, so we can ensure the transfer of land from DOC to DCAS.

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

In the immediate term, the City must do more to protect those detained and working on Rikers Island, as I wrote to the mayor last spring. That means providing access to PPE and vaccines, making sure that there are no delays in being seen by CHS, ensuring those in custody are able to see their loved ones and legal counsel and that programming resumes safely, and providing commissary items at no or reduced cost.

More broadly, we need to ensure that jails are not the first health care providers that New Yorkers in need get access to by taking decarceral steps and improving our primary care and mental health care outreach in communities. Such investments in mental health care could well have prevented incarceration for many of the nearly 3,000 individuals in DOC custody now who have a mental health diagnosis. However, as long as people are detained in City jails, they must get immediate, 24/7 access to comprehensive, quality, and culturally responsive care from Correctional Health Services and other City-funded providers. Incarcerated individuals are dependent on the City to provide for their health and safety, and as mayor, I will take that responsibility seriously. Lives hang in the balance. Tragically, the pandemic clarified just how incompatible jails are with safety in the middle of a public health crisis, testing the limits of our correctional health care system. Last spring, after learning that individuals in custody were placing sick calls to CHS but not receiving a response, I wrote to the mayor and DOC commissioner to alert them and urge them to act. It is unacceptable that anyone would be denied care, and as mayor, I would demand rigorous reporting of response times, outcomes, and patient feedback.

I have been proud to support the HALT Solitary Act, and this I repeated my call to the Board of Correction to eliminate the inhumane practice of solitary confinement in all its forms and advance an approach that centers safety, health, and rehabilitation, as envisioned in the NYC Jails Action Coalition and #HALTsolitary Campaign's blueprint to end punitive segregation. It is indefensible that 16 months have passed since the last set of public hearings on this matter—10 months since the announcement of the formation of the working group—and solitary confinement is still in use in this city. I've called for changes including: to provide at least 14 hours of out-of-cell time with access to meaningful congregate programming and human interaction; to provide individuals facing possible placement in RMAS with access to legal representation; to expand the categories of people exempt from placement in RMAS; to immediately abolish the use of restraint desks; and to cap the number of variances the Department may be allowed.

It is my hope that we can implement a new model, one that is grounded in a therapeutic approach and prioritizes safety over punishment, well ahead of the proposed implementation timeline. Every day that goes by that people are held in isolation inflicts additional harms and lasting trauma. Those who have endured solitary confinement and their loved ones have waited too long already.

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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 COVID-19. 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?

I have visited Rikers Island and, like everyone who passes through those gates, I was appalled by what I witnessed. The experience certainly helped to inform my decision in 2015 to become the first citywide elected official to call for the shutdown of Rikers Island, a full two years before the mayor finally agreed, and I was proud to work with the Close Rikers Coalition to help force that decision.

Since then, we have not worked hard enough to advance the cause of decarceration. Rikers Island is a stain on this city, and we must move quickly to shut it down. To close its doors for good, we must take a more aggressive approach in reducing the jail population, especially the pretrial population, which has been steadily increasing over the last eight months of this pandemic. That must include ending incarceration for technical parole violations, increasing the use of alternatives to bail like partially secured bonds while fighting for the elimination of the money bail system, and identifying individuals who can serve the remainder of their City sentences at home.

Significant reductions in the pretrial population can also be achieved by eliminating criminal penalties and enforcement for a number of offenses that pose no threat to community safety, granting amnesty for open arrest warrants for low-level offenses, and ending incarceration for unpaid court debt, among other strategies. Decarceration should also be advanced by dramatically improving re-entry services, creating more supportive housing, and reforming parole.

It is shameful that in the middle of a pandemic - when three people in DOC custody have already died after contracting COVID-19 - that the number of people in City jails is continuing to climb. While I will continue as Comptroller to call on the Mayor, State, and District Attorneys to release more people, particularly those at serious risk of illness, the DOC is in need of wholesale reform, and as Mayor, I will make this a top priority of my administration.

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?

The vast majority of women, trans and gender nonconforming individuals in DOC custody have mental health needs - as of April 20, 84 percent of women in City jails were designated as BradH status, a much higher rate than men on Rikers Island. Incarcerating these individuals - many of whom have suffered significant trauma, have been victimized themselves, and have been failed by so many systems, including our social safety net - makes no one safer. In fact, it is very often the consequences of poverty, and women's needs to protect themselves and care for their children and chosen families, that results in incarceration and the separation of families. This is insidious and it must end. In addition to decriminalizing sex work, shoplifting, and other offenses that pose no public safety risk, as mayor, I will take a holistic approach, charging my team with understanding the root causes of incarceration for women and trans and gender nonconforming New Yorkers and investing in the supports they need - from health care to affordable child care, safe housing and domestic and interpersonal violence resources.

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

Yes. We know individuals in city custody with serious mental health needs tend to have longer lengths of stay. Mental health challenges can make it especially difficult for individuals to make bail and participate in their legal defense, and the inhumane conditions on Rikers Island, as noted above, compound underlying health issues and can quickly lead to decompensation. To be clear: Rikers Island is no place for people with serious mental health needs, but no jail is an appropriate public health solution to mental illness. As mayor, filling the gaps in mental health support for New Yorkers involved in the criminal legal system will be central to my decarceration strategy and will require deep, long-term investments in the city's health care infrastructure. In the immediate term, I would seek a review of all cases of people with serious mental health needs in DOC custody to identify how many are serving City sentences and could be safely released to their community, with connections to appropriate care, and determine who could be moved out of Rikers Island with partnership from the district attorney's offices and courts.

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

As Mayor, I will ensure appointees reflect diversity of the city and are committed to upholding the reforms passed by the State legislature and choosing the least restrictive means necessary to ensure defendants return to court. Judges are entrusted with immense power and discretion, and the effectiveness of bail reform in reducing the pretrial population and ending the criminalization of poverty depends on judges' implementation of the law.

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?

Yes, as Comptroller, I have shined the spotlight on DOC's ballooning budget. During FY20, the full annual cost of incarceration was an astounding \$447,337 per person. As Mayor, I will reduce the DOC budget and prioritize rightsizing DOC for our smaller jail population, including through reductions in staffing which I believe will result in an annual cut of roughly \$200 million in the out-years.

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?

DOC needs new leadership, and as mayor, I will appoint a commissioner who is committed to making the necessary culture changes and sharing my vision for reform. It is wholly unacceptable that we have had ten Nunez reports now, each seemingly more damning than the next, and yet leadership at DOC - and this mayor - have not made this an immediate priority. We need accountability. I'm not going to pretend that an environment in which violence is so endemic and entrenched can be transformed quickly - the federal monitor has made that clear. And new management is not sufficient to get us to a place where we finally see declining rates of violence and use of force. However, I believe it is necessary.

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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?

We need to center impacted New Yorkers and survivors of Rikers Island in its closure, transition, and redirection into community investments. The creation of this historic commission by the Council is an important start to repair the harms of mass incarceration and usher in a new approach to public safety. The Commission will issue its recommendations as the new mayor builds their transition team and implements their vision for the future of public safety and decarceration. I will be prepared to review and respond to the recommendations of the commission, and to act on them.

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?

No, I have not. I have visited Rikers in the past and as Mayor, I would visit Rikers and other borough based jails, and speak to New Yorkers experiencing incarceration as well as survivors of Rikers. Consulting and seeking the guidance of impacted communities would be central to my decision-making process as mayor, as it has been as comptroller.

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?

Yes, the right to vote is paramount and must be protected. I've signed onto a letter urging the Board of Elections and Department of Correction to ensure that people who are incarcerated are able to access the ballot. As Mayor, I would similarly ensure that all incarcerated people are given an opportunity to register to vote and get a ballot. The Mayor's office of Criminal Justice would be focused on ensuring that at every election, people experiencing incarceration are able to voice their vote. These actions would build on a decades-long history of being a staunch advocate for voting rights – in fact, in the Assembly, I was the first to advance same-day voter registration.