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### **Testimony of Board Chair Jennifer Jones Austin**

#### **City Council Oversight Hearing on “COVID-19 in City Jails and Juvenile Detention Centers”**

**May 19, 2020**

Good afternoon Chair Powers, Chair Lancman and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting the Board of Correction to testify at this important hearing on the COVID response in the New York City Jail System. I am joined by the Executive Director of the Board of Correction, Margaret Egan, as well as Deputy Executive Director, Emily Turner, and my colleagues on the Board, Dr. Cohen and Mr. Regan.

I became Chair of the Board of Correction on March 30, 2020, as the pandemic was hitting New York City. This pandemic has been a challenge for so many across the City and I have been inspired by the heroic work of so many to respond. Staff and leadership at the Department of Correction and Correctional Health Services have shown an incredible commitment to collaboration, creativity and hard work to minimize the transmission of COVID-19 in the jails and provide care for those who are ill.

I want to extend my well-wishes for those people in custody, DOC staff, and CHS staff who are ill or have recovered from COVID-19. I also want to recognize that many DOC and CHS staff in the jails are putting their health at risk in service to the City of New York. Many people in custody and staff members have gotten sick during this pandemic and some have died. The Board sends our condolences to the family members, friends, and colleagues of those who have died.

I also want to recognize the staff of the Board of Correction has also responded to the crisis with great care, collaboration and creativity and are providing critical information so that the public understands how the agencies are responding and how their loved ones are being cared for in this moment. This is a very small staff and they have been tirelessly working to provide essential oversight.

We have been in close communication with the leadership of DOC and CHS and I appreciate that commitment from both agencies. We have also been in close communication with leadership from the Defender organizations, advocates, unions, people in custody, and families. Taken together, this communication helps us understand and provide the best view of how the Department and CHS are responding to the pandemic and how the jails continue to operate during the crisis.

Early on the Board made a series of public statements advocating among all criminal justice system stakeholders for a reduction in the jail population. The jail population has dropped below 4,000 people in custody for the first time in decades. This is an incredible accomplishment in normal times, but it is essential during this pandemic. The fewer people in custody, the fewer opportunities for transmission of the virus, and the more capacity CHS has to provide care and DOC has to effectively manage the jail system. We must continue to be vigilant in ensuring that the jail population remains low. This will be a challenge as the system begins to return to normal, but the Board will continue to press all levers to encourage stakeholders to use all alternatives available to maintain a low jail population.

This situation presents an incredible operational challenge. It is critical, as the jail system's oversight body, that we are attentive to both the individual and system issues that are presented. The Board has been and will continue to be a source of information to the public. We will also continue to raise issues for the Department and CHS to correct when necessary, as well as give credit where due. We encourage the agencies to continue to be as open and transparent as possible with the public, staff, people in custody and their families. Open communication is the best way to combat fear and anxiety and is essential to managing this crisis.