

The following Op-Ed by Mayor Bill de Blasio appeared in
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De Blasio Guest Commentary: Rikers Debate Cannot Stall Jail Reform
Commentary by Mayor Bill de Blasio

Monday, April 18, 2016

A teenager, waiting years for trial in solitary confinement. An officer, physically maimed by the inmates he works each day to protect. For years, these stories of abuse and negligence have emerged from Rikers Island all too frequently.

Today, as we continue to drive down crime, the idea of closing Rikers has returned to the forefront. Yet while this idea deserves serious consideration, we cannot allow the closure conversation to distract from jail reform needed *now* – long before any possible transition from Rikers could become reality. And we must make sure that in calls for Rikers' closure, our city does not become more focused on shutting down the facility than ending the culture that gave rise to its infamy.

We must focus on strategies to reduce violence, use the tools at our disposal to reduce recidivism, and safely decrease the jail population—and we must do this now, no matter where we house our jails in the future.

These are the reforms I'm focused on as Mayor. We're training our staff to carefully deescalate situations, work with young inmates, and help those with mental illness—resulting in an 11 percent drop in serious assaults on staff and a 23 percent drop in serious use-of-force incidents last year. We've reduced the use of punitive segregation by over two-thirds. We've opened specialized housing units so that those with mental illness receive the care they need. And in the new Beacon units where we've concentrated Commissioner Ponte's reforms—from more jobs training to higher staffing ratios to steady officer posts—we've had zero stabbings or slashings in more than six months.

We're also working to safely decrease the jail population by reducing unnecessary arrests, adding supervised-release slots, and speeding trials up. In partnership with courts, prosecutors, defenders and mayoral agencies, we are working to reduce case delays—and have already cleared 75 percent of the targeted cases that had stretched on for over a year. We have expanded supervised release to ensure that those who can safely remain in the community before their trial do so, and are working to simplify the bail process. We have

improved the summons process so that fewer people will end up with open warrants for minor crimes.

Closing Rikers alone will not inherently stop an inmate with mental illness from lashing out when he hasn't received the healthcare he needs. It won't suddenly provide a hardworking officer with the safety equipment that will protect her throughout her shift. And it won't automatically allow a young man who committed a low-level offense to safely wait for trial supervised in his community. These are reforms we must make—and we are making—no matter where our jails are located. Moving buildings alone is not the sweeping, comprehensive policy needed to make our jails safer and fairer.

After decades of neglect, culture change won't happen overnight. But we have signs that our reforms are starting to work. And no matter where we choose to house our jails ten years from now, today we need to keep moving down the path that is making the system better.

For the first time ever, we are confronting important questions about Rikers Island and our criminal justice system as a whole—in meaningful, realistic terms. The discussion about closing Rikers Island is an important one, and I welcome continued dialogue on this goal. But it cannot be the only goal. Because as New Yorkers and as progressives, we cannot merely relocate or rename a problem—we must reform it, now.