



My name is Vidal Guzman and I am a community organizer for JustLeadershipUSA. JustLeadershipUSA is leading the #CLOSErikers campaign, and I was a member of JLUSA when we launched this campaign three years ago. I am here to testify in support of building borough based facilities with specific conditions – to make sure that Rikers closes as quickly as possible. The Mayor’s Plan, which has been developed in response to the #CLOSErikers campaign, needs to be improved to meet more of our community’s needs before the City Council votes on it. This board has the opportunity to include those improvements we seek, as conditions in your vote.

I was incarcerated for a total of 7 years and the first time I was on Rikers Island was at 16 years old. One of the things I learned about Rikers is it prepares you to go in, but not to go out. When I came home at the end of 2008, I felt less than human, which is actually the point of Rikers Island - to dehumanize. I didn’t know how to return back to the world, so I just kept doing what landed me in Rikers to begin with. I was reincarcerated again at 19 years old. I’ve been home for good since 2014, and with community support and better choices, I have dedicated myself to ensure young people have more resources and possibilities than I once did – that means closing Rikers and building communities.

The violence on Rikers is traumatizing. When I was there, C.O.s (correctional officers) would turn their heads when a fight would happen between kids. They could have stopped them – instead they instigated violence and victimized people. The D.O.C. has proven it is unable and unwilling to end the culture of violence documented by [journalists](#) and the [Nunez reports](#). Rikers Island is beyond reform and the D.O.C. created this culture of violence in the first place. They failed us and refused to support rehabilitative or restorative justice practices, or learn how to do that work. Through Raise the Age, the City has shown progress by moving youth off of Rikers. But the D.O.C. shouldn’t be the caretaker of anyone, and they definitely shouldn’t run any new facilities. For facilities to serve the purpose of healing or rehabilitation, the people held there would need to mostly interact with staff who are trained for that purpose.

The City must commit that these facilities will be designed and operated to provide a healing environment. New facilities must be designed to easily take beds offline permanently. As we decarcerate further spaces must be repurposed for community needs. According to the Lippman Commission the smaller system – with fewer COs, fewer people incarcerated and new, safer facilities – would result in a potential annual savings of [\\$1.6 billion annually](#). Any savings must be allocated for “justice reinvestment” – according to the needs of the most impacted communities. In addition - we propose reallocating funds from the \$7.3B now budgeted for the NYPD, DAs, and Departments of Correction and Probation, to fully resource the kinds of community needs in our [#buildCOMMUNITIES platform](#). We know the number of people jailed in New York City will continue to drop – we are organizing to overhaul the criminal legal system and ensure decarceration, but we can achieve this faster with alternatives to incarceration and our [#buildCOMMUNITIES platform](#).

There are at least 5,400 empty jail beds on Rikers Island, which means the City can start demolishing jails now. Rikers Island has been open since 1925 and it has been a hell hole since. We can't keep it open any longer, and we cannot restart or delay this process and leave people suffering on Rikers longer.

We must improve this plan - given that the ULURP process will only determine the maximum stories allowed and the location of the facilities - we must use this time to move our own vision forward. While the City proposed going from 12 jails to 4 jails; and 15K bed capacity to 5k beds, we know it's possible to [achieve a capacity of less than 3,000 people](#) in the next five years. That can happen because of the pretrial state reforms we just got passed through the #FREEnewyork campaign, and other reforms that we're still pushing upstate like ending all money bail and supporting the Less is More parole reform bill.

There is [so much more the City can do](#) like using alternatives instead of City sentences of a year or less, ending the NYPD gang database, decriminalizing gravity knives, decriminalizing sex work, and all low-level transgressions, and diverting people with serious mental illnesses. In addition, all health needs including mental health and drug use treatment, prenatal and maternity care, as well as gender-affirming treatment for transgender and gender non-conforming people – must be available without justice involvement and must happen outside of jails in the most appropriate health settings.

I know Rikers, and I know I will not leave anyone behind there.