We need to destroy and reconstruct New York City’s criminal justice system. That should be said every time we discuss any part of this process, because every part of this process should move us closer to that goal.

The first step in achieving that goal is closing Rikers.

The necessity of closing Rikers cannot be overstated. It is irredeemable. It’s used to cage, control, and crush the humanity of the people who are trapped there – isolated from the communities to which they still belong to. While the population at Rikers has dropped significantly, more work remains.

How will this administration guarantee that the money saved from closing Rikers and transitioning to a borough-based system will be reinvested in the communities most impacted by the legacy of this notorious jail complex, which was named after a slave trader?

A vast majority of the population should be at home with a fair shot at justice and unfettered access to services that address the challenges of underfunded and over-criminalized communities. To achieve this, the Mayor must end broken windows policing, decriminalize all victimless crimes such as marijuana possession for all New Yorkers regardless of justice-involvement, and end the NYPD gang database – among other key reforms. We demand that he stop the flow of people coming into the justice system to realize the goals of closing Rikers and completing redefining justice.

Until that flow does stop, completely, we must serve and fight for the people who are trapped in the system and not ask them to hold on for several more decades until our elected representatives and our ideals meet to end all forms of incarceration and create thriving, sustainable community-based solutions. Rikers Island could never fulfill this obligation. Any city where Rikers Island still exists could never fulfill these needs or meet our demands—both fiscally and ideologically. The #CLOSErikers campaign refuses to leave anyone on Torture Island.

And when Rikers is closed, we cannot just replace it. There are people who refer to the construction of new facilities as the effort to “replace Rikers.” There are people who will say the city is lying to us and avoid opportunities to engage in this plan with a real set of demands that will change the course of history. We must have faith in the formerly incarcerated leaders who marched us to this point. Believe in the impacted communities who forced the city to accept their role in closing Rikers and repairing the harms in our communities.

The administration must focus on services, programming, and community beyond these facilities. They should prioritize the rapid decarceration advocates have been mapping out for years, not caging our people. The city’s new system must eliminate the Department of Corrections and be operated by an agency focused on the health and wellness of community members both inside and outside of these facilities. The Mayor and City Council’s plan for a borough-based jail system must signal the end of Rikers’ reign over our city. All city officials must implement our demands to #buildCOMMUNITIES by investing the estimated $540 million and more from closing Rikers Island into alternatives outside of the justice system or any institutions not led by our communities.

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