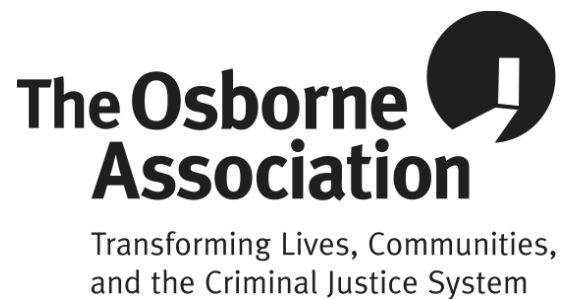


**Testimony of the Osborne Association  
to the  
New York City Council  
Regarding Borough Based Jails**

**September, 2019**

**Presented by  
Elizabeth Gaynes  
President & CEO**



Good afternoon, I am Elizabeth Gaynes, President and CEO at the Osborne Association.

A core part of Osborne's mission for the last 85+ years is to transform jails and prisons for the people who live there, work there, and visit there. My predecessor at Osborne, Austin MacCormick, had previously served as commissioner of the NYC Department of Correction under Mayor LaGuardia, starting a year or two after Rikers opened. My first visit to Rikers Island was in 1978, and over the last 40 years, I visited as a lawyer, a service provider, and a family member. Over the last 25 years, Osborne has provided discharge planning and vocational programs at Rikers. We have probably served more than 75,000 incarcerated people, at 8 NYC jails, during that time. We have seen the population go up and down; the words change but the music stays the same. And it will continue to play the same sad tune until the City Council votes once and for all to Close Rikers.

Over the last year, I have had the privilege of being part of the team of architects and planners that produced the design before you. Osborne's focus was community engagement and, based on our experience working in the jails, advising on design needs. It is unfortunate that the largest municipal jail union in the country decided to sit this one out, when current jails are inherently unsafe for the people who live and work in them, and better design would allow for better jail management at every level. We do not need to spend millions of dollars for people at McKinsey with no experience in corrections coming up with algorithms about jail management. We need an environment that respects the humanity of everyone who lives, works and visits there, and that allows for local control by wardens who are trained and supported in running their jails.

It's clear that the proposed jails are probably too tall; no one wants police stations, courts and jails to be the most prominent part of any community. But as long as New Yorkers expect the police to make arrests and courts to judge and jails to detain, the community should expect to site them. And while it's debatable about exactly how many beds will be needed, it's not an uncontrollable factor. If the

population were to expand beyond current projections, maybe Staten Island would have to be like every other county in the entire United States, having a county jail. And adding a separate facility for women would also make sense.

It will be important, if you vote to Close Rikers but add restrictions on the size of new jails, to make sure that any reduction in square footage does not lead to reduced living space for those incarcerated. We know that some would argue that the size is too big because of too many “amenities,” others would point out, correctly, that a vertical jail has management challenges. But we are a large city without a lot of land available for more traditional jail structures, and we’ve gotten pretty good at building tall buildings. And the people who are most directly affected -- the people who live and work and visit DOC jails -- are, after all, your constituents too.

If the choice is between the plan before you and maintaining the country’s last remaining penal colony, it’s not much of a choice. The fact is that family-friendly visiting areas, program space for educational and recreational activity, and single rooms/cells are the only safe way to manage the jails – for those who live there, work there, and visit there.

According to Nelson Mandela, who knew a thing or two about jail:

***“It always seems impossible --- UNTIL IT’S DONE”***

Please do it.

Respectfully submitted,  
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