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New York City Charter Revision Committee

By Email

Dear Commissioners

Re: The New York City Board of Correction

I am currently a London-based independent consultant on jail and prison safety and effective oversight. I have over 18 years of inspection, investigative, and senior management experience in UK prisons. I have supervised over 200 investigations into prison suicides, homicides, drug-related, and natural cause deaths. I was the head of violence reduction for HM Prison Service (the UK agency which manages most prisons in England and Wales) and served as Secretary to two Parliamentary Committees on prison safety. In addition, I have worked in the United States as a Senior Advisor to the Prison Rape Elimination Act Resource Center (PREA) and as a Consultant to the New York City Board of Correction.

I write to urge the New York City Charter Revision to endorse its staff's recommendation to fundamentally strengthen jail oversight by making the Board of Correction's budget independent. This Charter revision would protect and adequately fund the oversight agency for the long-term and would create new independence, in line with international best practices. A strong and independent jail oversight agency must be a part of any vision for a new criminal justice system. In addition to its own intervention and reporting, it is via the Board of Correction that the public, policymakers, the press, and other stakeholders will receive the information and access they need to hold government accountable and prevent wrongdoing.

Based on my 18 years of experience in this field, both within the United States and in United Kingdom, I strongly believe that robust, adequately funded and sufficiently independent oversight is crucial to ensure safe and decent jail conditions. The UK has a 'layered' model of

oversight, including six primary forms. The oldest oversight entity has been in existence since 1550. Best practices developed over the past 500 years led us to use the “healthy prison test” to measure every prison. The four ‘tests’ of a healthy prison are: safety (prisoners, even the most vulnerable, are held safely); respect (prisoners are treated with respect for their human dignity); purposeful activity (prisoners are able and expected to engage in activity that is likely to benefit them); resettlement (prisoners are prepared for their release into the community and helped to reduce the likelihood of reoffending).

As has been widely reported by the Board of Correction, popular media, federal litigation, and the accounts of people who have been incarcerated there, the New York City jails would likely score quite poorly on a healthy prison test. The City’s plan to close Rikers Island and open new borough jails offers a path forward from the current state of the jails however, in order to avoid recreating the current conditions, New York City will need strong and sustained public oversight of the new jails. For example, if and when there is a death in custody, the Board of Correction must be empowered and resourced to independently investigate, share its findings with the public, and push for improvements in jail policy or practice to learn from such tragedy and prevent future harm.

The Charter Revision Commission has an exceptional opportunity to align New York City jail oversight with international standards. I encourage you to revise the Charter to protect the Board’s budget.

I am grateful to the Commission for the opportunity to contribute to this crucial debate. Please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or email if I can be of any assistance.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kate Eves', written in a cursive style.

Kate Eves

Independent Consultant