

The Public Ought to Know: Closing of unused city jails would save millions

By Corey Bearak



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Last month, some news articles explored the national growth in prisons. This phenomenon, fortunately, has bypassed our state and city, where jail populations have steadily declined.

The city could save millions in annual operating costs for jails essentially not in use. Think about the Queens, Brooklyn and Bronx Houses of Detention and turning empty prisons into usable space, returned to the tax rolls. Brooklyn's jail occupies prime downtown Brooklyn real estate. The other jails also occupy attractive sites in Kew Gardens and within blocks of Yankee Stadium.

Think about the tens of millions of expense budget dollars the city could redirect to other needs. Recall the previous column on housing, which noted that some \$2 billion is budgeted for capital construction of city jails.

The city saves money when it closes jail spaces. Some would rather limit the jail population on Riker's Island and disperse some detainees to the houses of detention in the borough. Either way, less jail space to operate reduces costs and increases the safety of prison guards, other prison workers and inmates.

For the past three administrations, the city's Department of Corrections has reduced staffing of certain prison posts, relying instead on technology, including video surveillance, to observe certain critical locations. Fewer jails to staff ought to mean a reconsideration of some of these unstaffed posts.

The focus is not safety in the jails. The debate about how many and which jails to keep open, and what savings accrues, misses another fundamental matter: The city can take steps to reduce its jail population and its reliance on jails by alternative-to-incarceration programs, also known as "ATIs," which not only cost taxpayers less than jails but score higher than jails in keeping their "graduates" from returning to a life of crime.

City jails incarcerate "state-ready" convicts awaiting transfer to state prison after sentencing, detainees awaiting trial unable to post bail and low-level non-violent offenders. ATIs make sense as an alternative to many offenders serving time in jail for misdemeanors and some non-violent felonies. Former Mayor Ed Koch and Borough President Ferrer also advocated a Second Chance program as an alternative to state prison for non-violent felons.

This requires a fundamental change in policy. From my days as counsel/chief of staff to the chair of the City Council Public Safety Committee, mayors tended not to direct sufficient resources to ATIs. In addition, though Mayor Michael Bloomberg combined the city jails with the Probation Department — something I

advocated a decade ago — most ATIs remain outside the former Correction and Probation agencies and instead are supervised by the mayor's criminal justice coordinator.

Also, the smaller budget pie sliver for ATIs also means fewer dollars to maintain and develop comprehensive ATI programs that can really put a dent in the jails' budgets.

Take a look at the dollars: Annually it costs \$30,000 per person for state prison, \$60,000 for city jails and \$112,000 for youth detention (vs. a \$10,000 cost for a NYC public school student).

Contrast these with the cost of ATI and Alternative to Detention programs: Residential drug treatment runs \$17,000 to \$20,000; Nonresidential drug treatment, \$5,000 to 6,000; Alternative to Detention, \$10,000; and Community service supervision, \$1,500.

Take a look at the savings: The city would save \$25,000 to \$40,000, state prisons would save \$10,000 to 25,000, and city youth detention savings would run from \$92,000 to \$107,000. The Citizens Budget Commission estimates New York state could save \$96 million per year in prison costs without reducing public safety. To the extent that city ATI programs support this reduction, the state should reimburse the city.

More important than dollars, look at the results, the "recidivism rate" at which offenders return to crime. Eighty-one percent of males and 45 percent of females in state juvenile detention become repeat offenders. Forty-four percent of those who serve time in state prison return to state custody within three years, and 69 percent of state prisoners in 1998 served previously.

One-half of inmates released from city jails get reincarcerated within a year and 15 percent within 90 days. Even costly city detention fails: 40 percent of youth detainees return within a year.

Given the cost savings, even if an ATI/ATD program produced similar recidivism rates, it would be successful, but the ATI/ATD programs prove more successful by targeting varying populations. A program proposed in December 2001 offers the model for even greater success by coordinating the existing ATI/ATD programs and ensuring that program participants receive the appropriate range of supervision and services.

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