



National Association of Social Workers

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**NASW-NYC STATEMENT
IN SUPPORT OF
CLOSING RIKERS ISLAND**

**in Solidarity with
JustLeadership USA**

The CloseRikers Campaign of JustLeadership USA aims to close Rikers and seek smart solutions for decarceration. Support for this campaign is a call for us to uphold basic human rights and dignity for all detained individuals, set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This also aligns with the National Association of Social Worker's Code of Ethics, which mandates social workers to social justice and to advocate for the dignity and worth of persons. Both guiding instruments compel NASW-NYC to identify the individual and systemic practices of egregious torture, abuse, and extrajudicial killings within the largest jail system in the world.

Recently, The World Report from Human Rights Watch cited the tragic suicidal death of Kalief Browder, a 22 year-old man who was placed in solitary confinement at Rikers for nearly two years, and also denied healthcare. Mr. Browder was only one example among thousands of young people and older adults that have and continue to suffer from denial of basic medical care, severe abuse at the hands of correctional officers, including physical and sexual assault by

guards, complex trauma, severe head injuries, physically and mentally torturous conditions, human degradation and humiliation, and long periods of extreme isolation.

Citing the suicide of Kalief Browder, President Barack Obama later announced a ban on solitary confinement sentences for juveniles. While this is one important incremental change within criminal justice reform, we must collectively acknowledge as a community that inhumane conditions on Rikers Island have deteriorated and festered well beyond repair.

It is widely known and well documented that Rikers detains mostly poor people of color who are often unnecessarily trapped in this system while awaiting trial. According to Glenn Martin, President of JustLeadershipUSA, a human rights group that seeks to reduce the incarcerated population in half by the year 2030, “people who are held on Rikers— the majority without being convicted of a crime and simply because they can’t afford bail— must survive barbaric conditions. Many don’t survive at all.

Jason Echeverria and Carlos Mercado both died on Rikers. Victor Woods went into a violent seizure while a guard sat watching him and drinking a cup of coffee. Since 2010, stabbings and slashings have doubled. In 2014 alone, ten people died.”

In addition to the thousands of people who are jailed at Rikers Island on a yearly basis, NASW-NYC is concerned about the direct impact on Rikers staff, legal professionals, and social workers who are exposed to horrible jail conditions and as a result, vicarious trauma. The correctional environment has consistently proven to be physically, emotionally, and psychologically detrimental to a community of law-abiding citizens who are employed to routinely interface with Rikers Island.

CloseRikers is a holistic perspective of the conditions on Rikers Island and a community-wide effort to shut it down. This call speaks to a deep-seated public health concern for all of New York City and its tax paying citizens.

While acknowledging that a mass criminalization epidemic exists in the United States, NASW-NYC supports the effort to decarcerate one of the most oppressive jail systems based in New York City. The CloseRikers Campaign calls for completely shutting down Rikers Island and NASW-NYC Chapter is in solidarity with and endorses this campaign.

For more information visit: <https://www.justleadershipusa.org/closerikers/>