



P.O. BOX 56157
NEW ORLEANS, LA 70156
P: 504-522-0617
F: 888-533-0911

MARJORIE R. ESMAN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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OPEN LETTER CONCERNING ORLEANS PARISH PRISON

VIA FACSIMILE:

Mr. Arnie Fielkow - (504) 658-1068
Ms. Jackie Clarkson - (504) 658-1068
Ms. Susan Guidry - (504) 658-1016
Ms. Stacy Head – (504) 658-1025
Ms. Kristen Giselson Palmer - (504) 658-1037
Ms. Cynthia Hedge-Morrell - (504) 658-1048
Mr. Jon Johnson - (504) 658-1058

Dear Members of the New Orleans City Council:

On Thursday, July 1, 2010 the City Council will vote on plans to expand Orleans Parish Prison to 5,832 beds, large enough for 1 bed for every 60 residents. We are asking you to vote against the current plan to expand Orleans Parish Prison (OPP), a jail already unnecessarily large. According to the Metropolitan Crime Coalition, our city arrests far too many people for non-violent or petty offenses.¹ Expanding our jail will waste city resources that could be used for countless other matters, including efforts that have a demonstrated effect on stopping violent crime.

Unfortunately, far too many people in our criminal justice system are in jail for minor offenses. From January 2007 until June 2009, on average just 2.24% arrests in New Orleans were for violent felonies.² 86% of arrests were for misdemeanors, municipal, traffic violations, and other arrests.³ At the same time, Jefferson Parish—which has a population larger than New Orleans and a reputation for being “tough on crime”—has a jail with fewer than 1,000 beds.⁴ Orleans Parish Prison, currently being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice⁵, has a current capacity of 3,851 beds, large enough for 1 bed for every 92 residents.

¹ “[The New Orleans Criminal Justice] system remains inundated with arrests for very minor offenses.” Metropolitan Crime Commission, Orleans Parish Criminal Justice System Accountability Report, 2009, available at: <http://www.metropolitancrimecommission.org/documents/2009NOCJSAccountabilityReport.pdf>

² Metropolitan Crime Commission, Orleans Parish Criminal Justice System Accountability Report, Fall 2009, available at: <http://www.metropolitancrimecommission.org/documents/NOCJSAccountabilityReport-Fall2009.pdf>

³ Id.

⁴ Bruce Egger, Vote on prison rebuilding plan delayed by New Orleans City Council, N.O. Times Picayune, June 18, 2010, available at: http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2010/06/vote_on_prison_rebuilding_plan.html

⁵ The U.S. Department of Justice recently found that “conditions at OPP violate the constitutional rights of inmates.” Letter from U.S. Department of Justice to Sheriff Marlin Gusman (September 11, 2010), available at: http://www.justice.gov/crt/split/documents/parish_findlet.pdf

Jail	Population ⁶	Jail Population ⁷	Ratio
Orleans Parish	354,850	5,862 (proposed size)	1 in 60
Orleans Parish	354, 850	3, 851 (current capacity)	1 in 92
Alameda County, CA (Oakland, CA)	1,491,482	4,405	1 in 338
Harris County (Houston, TX)	4,070,989	11,360	1 in 358
Los Angeles County	9,848,011	19,533	1 in 504
Cook County (Chicago, IL	5,287,037	9,737	1 in 542

There is no doubt that the outdated facilities that make up Orleans Parish Prison need to be replaced. However, the jail's size should be based on an evidence-based solution to our public safety problems. **New Orleans is struggling in the battle for public safety. We should not rebuild an obsolete and broken system.** The Council should vote against the wasteful⁸ expansion of the jail, and should vote to form and staff a group with national expertise as well as local knowledge to make a prompt and educated recommendation to the Council on an appropriate sized jail.⁹

At a time of massive budget shortfalls, New Orleans should not waste funds. The Sheriff's proposed jail will not make us any safer, as we will continue to lock up New Orleanians on traffic citations, rather than focusing on the violent crime that plagues our community. Please vote no to the expensive expansion of the jail and vote to form a group with expertise and staffing that will recommend a plan that saves money and fights violent crime.

Thank You,

ACLU of Louisiana
 Marjorie Esman, Executive Director
mesman@laaclu.org or 504.522.0628

Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana
 Dana Kaplan, Executive Director
dkaplan@jjpl.org or 504.522.3949

⁶ Available at: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>

⁷ Available at: <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2195>

⁸ The City will have to pay to house the prisoners who are held in the new expanded jail, although FEMA will pay some of the cost to build the physical buildings.

⁹ The Vera Institute of Justice is a national leader in criminal justice research and technical assistance and has a New Orleans office. They have been working since 2006 to help local government improve the system. Vera is available to do this type of study in New Orleans.

<http://www.vera.org/>

SilenceIsViolence
Ken Foster and Baty Landis
www.silenceisviolence.org

Turning Point Partners
Lou Furman
lou@turningpointpartners.com or 504.866.3046

V.O.T.E.
Norris Henderson
norris@vote-nola.org

Southern Poverty Law Center
Thena K. Robinson, Esq., School-to-Prison Reform Project
Thena.robinson@splcenter.org or 504.486.8982 ext. 228

Safe Streets/Strong Communities
Allen James, Alison McCrary
ajames@safestreetsnola.org, alimc02@yahoo.com or 504.522.3949

Hope House
Brother Don Everard
deverard@bellsouth.net

Advocates for Environmental Human Rights
Nathalie Walker and Monique Harden
mharden@ehumanrights.org or 504.799.3061

Loyola University New Orleans College of Law, Law Clinic & Center for Social Justice
Hiroko Kusuda
Assistant Clinic Professor
hkusuda@loyno.edu or 504.861.5595

Elizabeth Cummings, Attorney at Law
ElizabethC@thejusticecenter.org

Mary E. Howell, Attorney at Law
maryhowell316@gmail.com

Sarah Ottinger, Attorney at Law

G. Ben Cohen, Attorney at Law

Rev. Fred Kammer, SJ
Director, Jesuit Social Research Institute