

October 11, 2017

Opening Statement Robert L. Cohen, MD regarding reappointment by the City Council to the Board of Correction

Good Afternoon:

My name is Bobby Cohen. I am here to request your support for my reappointment as one of the three City Council Representatives on the New York City Board of Correction. I have served in this position for 8 years, and hope you will recommend me for another term.

I was born in the Bronx, I attended public schools in Queens, and graduated from Bayside High School. I attended Princeton University and Rush Medical College in Chicago. I completed my residency and chief residency in Internal Medicine at Cook County Hospital. While in Chicago I did research on the epidemiology of epilepsy in the Illinois Prison System.

I returned to New York City in 1981 to serve as a Chief Physician at EMTC, one of the facilities on Rikers Island, and soon, in May of 1982, as Director of Montefiore Rikers Island Health Services. I worked each day on Rikers Island until the fall of 1986, when I became the Vice President for Medical Operations of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation. After leaving Health and Hospitals in 1988, I started a clinical practice of Internal Medicine in Manhattan and worked at St. Vincent's Hospital as the Director of their AIDS Center.

I have been appointed by Federal Judges in Florida, New York, Connecticut, Michigan, and Ohio to monitor and improve medical care for prisoners who have been denied access to basic medical care. I served for seventeen years as a Board Member of the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, representing the American Public Health Association. The Board of the National Commission is made up of 36 representatives of national health care, legal, and correctional organizations including the American Sheriff's Association, the American Medical Association, the American Nurses Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Jail Association, and the American Dental Association.

In New York, I served for 17 years as a member of the Board of the Fortune Society. I live in Manhattan, and my two children attended New York City public schools through their high school graduation.

I have worked in and around New York's jails for more than thirty-five years. I was honored to have the opportunity to work on Rikers Island daily for five years. Although the City jails have always been violent, they have also been a national model for medical care, mental health care, drug use services, and civilian oversight.

I bring more than 35 years of direct experience providing, administering, and monitoring medical and mental health services in jails and prisons throughout the United States. I visit the jails regularly, almost monthly, sometimes several times per month on behalf of the Board of Correction. We are concerned about the safety about all who work and live in the jails. We need to obtain available technology, particularly body scanners, to find and remove weapons from the jails. We need to decrease the use of the tortuous practice of prolonged solitary confinement, because it is inhumane, does not improve behavior, and increases violence in the jails.

It is important to me that New York City's jails represent the values that are in the City Charter which create and support the Board of Correction. The Board establishes minimum standards for the care, custody, correction, treatment, supervision, and discipline of all persons held or confined under the jurisdiction of the Department of Correction. I believe that this a critical function, and I believe that the Board and those who work and live in the jails benefit from my expertise.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to give this opening statement.