June 30, 2010

OPEN LETTER CONCERNING ORLEANS PARISH PRISON

VIA FACSIMILE:
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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.

3 Id.
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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jail</th>
<th>Population⁶</th>
<th>Jail Population⁷</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orleans Parish</td>
<td>354,850</td>
<td>5,862 (proposed size)</td>
<td>1 in 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orleans Parish</td>
<td>354,850</td>
<td>3,851 (current capacity)</td>
<td>1 in 92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alameda County, CA (Oakland, CA)</td>
<td>1,491,482</td>
<td>4,405</td>
<td>1 in 338</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harris County (Houston, TX)</td>
<td>4,070,989</td>
<td>11,360</td>
<td>1 in 358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles County</td>
<td>9,848,011</td>
<td>19,533</td>
<td>1 in 504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook County (Chicago, IL)</td>
<td>5,287,037</td>
<td>9,737</td>
<td>1 in 542</td>
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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,

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⁶ Available at: [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html)
⁷ Available at: [http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2195](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/](http://www.vera.org/)
SilenceIsViolence
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