



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jessica Ramos

## Queens lawmaker Ramos, advocates hold panel on the ripple effects of mass incarceration

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Advocates and elected officials joined Children of Promise NYC founder and CEO, Sharon Content, to engage in a thought-provoking conversation, entitled “Breaking the Chains of Incarceration,” on the racial disparities and trauma inflicted on Black and Brown communities with an outdated criminal justice system.

Content works daily with what she calls “the unseen victims of incarceration,” which are family members who often feel unheard and have a lack of voice regarding criminal justice policies. The open conversation delved into the history behind issues such as economic insecurity, the school-to-prison pipeline, and more with Senator Jessica Ramos, CEO and Executive Director of FPWA Jennifer Jones Austin, Founder of Pure Legacee Naquasia Pollard, and CEO and Executive Director of JCCA Ron Richter.

As issues plaguing Black and Brown families were laid out, the panelists discussed how they should be dismantled. The subject of racism has been the ugly shadow shrouding society, and panelists shared the effect it has had creating a vicious cycle of mental illness and mass incarceration in Black and Brown communities, so much so that New York City declared racism a public health crisis last week.

Jones Austin states that the cause of trauma for marginalized groups began with slavery and the oppression of marginalized communities. She likewise explained that the root of systemic racism began with the process of indigenous people being ripped from their homelands, enslaved, proceeded by Jim Crow Laws, lynching, enforced racial segregation, inequitable wages, mass incarceration, and more.

“I believe the justice system is operating exactly as it was created and designed. It’s not broken. It was designed exactly to operate in that manner. The justice system does not provide justice. You know, certain people in certain communities are protected. And then certain individuals and certain communities are violated. That’s how it was created,” Content said, asking Jones Austin who also serves as the chair of the New York Board of Corrections, “What are some of the ways the commission is working towards bringing awareness to families impacted by the criminal justice system and the cycle of trauma and racism that exists?”

Jones Austin described the Racial Justice Commission and the importance of acknowledging the harm done in order to move forward if the issues have any hope of being corrected.

“What America has done is Band-Aid the response,” Jones Austin stated, adding that many either ignored the problem at hand or just moved on, but the correct response is to acknowledge the problem, take responsibility, and commit to fixing it.

This year the deteriorating conditions at Rikers Island have been in the spotlight after the 11th Nunez Monitor Report and several visits from elected officials. Senator Ramos states that she has visited the site four times, and on one occasion even witnessed a man attempt suicide as well as the inhumane living conditions. This year alone the facility has seen 14 deaths.

“Every legislator should be visiting our correctional facilities and seeing the conditions in which we are holding human beings in our custody. So that we can understand the harm that we’re creating ourselves, and in perpetuating this system. My visit to Rikers was specifically to OBCC on this one occasion...I saw 12 to 20 men sleeping on the floor,” Ramos said, describing the site of human excrement and urine-soaked into the floors since several of the toilets were not working. In some cases, she also saw bags filled with human waste.

The sheer amount of bodies in one room gave Ramos cause for health and safety concerns.

“And of course COVID running rampant, medications are not being given to these men on a timely basis, and a slew of human rights violations are being committed. That’s the truth. I mean, I’ve described it as a House of Horrors,” Ramos said.

The Queens state senator urged listeners to reach out to legislators within every level of government and ask them to visit Rikers Island and to sign the Fair and Timely parole so that as many individuals as possible can re-engage in their communities.

“It is important to address the trauma associated with mass incarceration. Through the Treatment Not Jails legislation, we encourage judges in the legal system to consider diversion methods in court to rid ourselves of this mass incarceration issue,” Senator Ramos said.

Naquasia Pollard, Founder of Pure Legacee added that these conditions being uncovered are nothing new. It is something she has gone through herself as a formerly incarcerated person, and the trauma it inflicted on herself, her daughter, and other members of her family.

“As someone who was previously incarcerated for the majority of my daughter’s life, I saw firsthand the impact that had on her and her well-being,” said Naquasia Pollard, Founder of Pure Legacee. “We always think that because children with incarcerated parents have

someone to stay with and food on their plates, they should be fine but there is so much more that is needed. More support needs to be created in our community so that children get the adequate mental health resources needed to deal with this trauma.”