

Dear Honored County Legislators,

We are Erie County residents reaching out to express our concerns regarding the proposal to close the Erie County Holding Center (EHC) and to expand the Erie County Correctional Facility (ECCF) in Alden. This almost \$430 million proposal, which would be the largest capital project ever funded by the county, will not support a thriving Western New York nor improve the lives of its residents. We have four main concerns as follows:

- **CONCERN 1: DEPARTMENT CULTURE & COUNTY CULTURE:** Under at least two different sheriffs, the sheriff's department has had a rate of an incarcerated person dying from medical neglect or other human rights violations every 4-5 months. For comparison, [Rikers Island has an average of about one death per month, despite an average daily population of over 10,000](#), so Erie County's facilities are over twice as deadly as Rikers. **A renovated incarceration facility won't change the culture of repeated human rights violations, or address the multiple lawsuits against the sheriff's office which are costing county taxpayers millions of dollars in settlements.** In fact, shifting operations to Alden, away from community scrutiny, is likely to strengthen the culture of impunity. We call on you to consider, what do we want Erie County's legacy to be? Do we measure "community success" in Erie County through how much we spend on a jail or how many people we put in jail, or through how many people we connect with housing, healthcare, and/or substance abuse disorder treatment? Dan Castle, the Commissioner of Environment and Planning, and other members of the feasibility study committee have pitched their proposed renovations as "state of the art"--but why is Erie County more interested in building a state-of-the-art jail than in building state-of-the-art mental health or substance use disorder treatment facilities?
- **CONCERN 2: DISTANCE:** Moving jail operations to Alden would further isolate anyone in the facility, both staff and those incarcerated. [Former Erie County Legislator April Baskin stated "\[moving to Alden\] will make it much harder for detainees to maintain contact with their family by significantly increasing the distance between their neighborhoods and where they are being detained."](#) **People will be further from their homes and families (their support systems), emergency medical services, and legal representation.** The distance will discourage medical professionals from applying to jail jobs, where there is already a 25% vacancy rate. Moving jail operations to Alden will also increase transportation costs because it would be irresponsible to simply release people in a remote community where they are not from. The sheriff has previously stated transportation is a recurring issue for getting people to and from court. Since only 47% of individuals are incarcerated for longer than a week in county facilities, costs for distal transportation, including vehicle maintenance and depreciation, are fiscally illogical. Although the Sheriff's office has offered to partner with NFTA to make Alden more accessible, a similar program has already been abandoned once, and there are no assurances that, if revived, it would not be abandoned again. A genuine commitment to providing reliable transportation to those in the Alden facility would've resulted in this program already being restarted without the new construction proposal. In any event, an inaccessible facility with an unreliable bus is no substitute for an accessible facility.

- **CONCERN 3: FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY & BREAKING THE REVOLVING DOOR OF IMPRISONMENT:** The sheriff's office stated in 2024 that about 60% of county [detainees] are treated for some type of mental illness, which is above the national average; moreover, Michael Phillips, the superintendent for jail management, admitted that "Jails weren't meant to be mental health providers." This suggests that the relatively well-funded sheriff's department is expensively and ineffectively attempting to fill gaps created by the underfunding of other county services. Due to federal budget cuts, Erie County already faces increased spending in many sectors. **Incarcerating a person is almost double the cost of providing needed housing or healthcare services** Moreover, multiple studies demonstrate that **communities with ample housing and healthcare resources experience less crime**, and also that incarcerating someone without addressing the root reasons that they committed a crime merely **creates a revolving door** of repeated incarceration. According to April Baskin in 2020, "Multiple studies show that a detainee who maintains regular contact with family and friends is less likely to be a repeat offender". Therefore, **budgetary decisions should focus on keeping people in the community** and on addressing root causes of crime. The county should be prioritizing investment in mental health services provided by appropriately trained medical professionals, who are adequately compensated for their expertise, and should be focusing on increasing beds in mental health facilities and substance use disorder facilities instead of on increasing jail beds. The county should also support and invest in alternatives to incarceration such as the Community Responder Model, the Treatment Court Expansion Act and the additional alternatives listed in the feasibility study. The Sheriff has repeatedly requested more beds at ECMC for people in crisis. Jail is no place for people who are detoxing (such as Sean Riordan), people with serious mental illness (such as William Hager), and people with severe chronic health conditions (such as James Ellis). It makes far more sense to expand capacity in existing healthcare facilities for these services than to build new jail beds. Were Sean Riordan, William Hager, and James Ellis placed in health care beds instead of jailed, they would most likely be alive today, and the county would not be facing multi-million dollar lawsuits for their preventable deaths. Investing even more county money into 156 new jail beds specifically for detox, acute and sub-acute mental health needs, and chronic health conditions is a playbook for ensuring additional lawsuits for years to come.
- **CONCERN 4: LACK OF BUDGETARY TRANSPARENCY:** The proposal does not include the project's full cost. The feasibility study was commissioned by architecture firms but it omits demolition costs at either facility that would be vital for making an informed decision. It also does not discuss the expenses and complications that would be involved in demolishing ECHC, which (due to proximity to other buildings, city contracts, etc.) are likely greater than that of Alden. A similar plan to close ECHC already failed to demonstrate budgetary savings in 2020. Further, a commitment to Alden entails a permanent commitment to increased travel costs for, at best, one-time savings. Lastly, one of the noted "benefits" in the feasibility study of choosing Alden was that the facility has "ample room for facility expansion, if bail reforms are terminated and there is a necessity to increase bed space capacity in the future." Which implies even greater spending as well as a lack of support for a law that has already reduced the jail population.

We have demands that are solutions for the inadequacies identified above:

- **DEMAND 1: Before any construction or renovation, the county must reduce the total number of people incarcerated in the two county jails to 600.** This can be achieved through increased investment in community public health and drug treatment programs. As stated by the county sheriff, the majority of the correctional population has a mental health or substance use concern that the sheriff's department is unable to address. By effectively supporting these needs in the community, we can decrease the use of ineffective measures like incarceration. Any new county money from any source spent on incarceration must be matched dollar for dollar, bed for bed with new county money spent on community mental health and substance use disorder treatment resources.
- **DEMAND 2: Close and demolish the ECCF and update the downtown ECHC at its current size capacity.** By prioritizing investments in community resources, there will be no need for the renovated ECHC to exceed its current capacity of 638. All planning committees for the renovations must include, as full members, representation of stakeholders, including formerly incarcerated persons, families of currently incarcerated individuals, and jail reform advocates, with the representatives nominated by existing local organizations with a demonstrated commitment to change, and also union representatives.
- **DEMAND 3: For any medical or treatment services within ECHC, the treatment and funds must not be overseen by the sheriff, other law enforcement entities, or the prison industrial complex.**
- **DEMAND 4: Prior to the allocation of funds for renovation, the county legislators must impose on the sheriff's office a concrete plan that responds to the known non-physical-plant deficiencies in the department, including the record of human rights abuses, lack of transparency, and lack of independent oversight.**

When Erie County residents are facing increasingly unaffordable housing, a widespread mental health crisis, job loss, and the prospect of even higher prices for everyday goods, plus cuts to basic needs like food and health insurance, prioritizing jail construction is an abdication of leadership. Why is it that some Erie County leaders are willing to borrow \$430 million to build jail beds, but not affordable housing, community centers, crisis centers, or treatment beds? We hope every County legislator takes the time to consider what this project will mean: the county would spend over \$800,000 per bed to build 522 new beds at the Alden jail, where most people incarcerated would sleep for less than 7 days. Have any of your constituents, in any district, asked for this? Do they think that is a good investment of their tax dollars? We certainly do not, and we ask county leaders to prioritize "state of the art" community mental health and substance use care, and make a plan for achieving that, before committing another cent to this proposal.

Signed,  
The No New Jail Erie County Campaign