

## Our 2018 Pro Bono Hot list Celebrating law firms that do well by doing good.



LATHAM & WATKINS

### The ‘Herculean’ Effort to Close Rikers Island

**AFTER A DAYLONG VISIT IN 2016 TO RIKERS** Island, New York City’s notorious jail complex, the members of the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice & Incarceration Reform understood on a fundamental level that it had to shut down, said Jonathan Lippman, the former chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals and of counsel at Latham & Watkins.

“When we came back from that visit to Rikers—whether we verbalized it or not—we all knew what needed to be done here,” Lippman said. Lippman was tasked by New York City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito to head the commission. “Nothing short of taking down this accelerator of human misery, this stain on the soul of New York City, would do,” he said.

In April 2017, the commission suggested just that—issuing a 148-page report that recommended closing Rikers, cutting the city’s jail population in half, and opening up smaller jails in each of the city’s boroughs that would offer a more humane experience for both prisoners and guards. The report was quickly embraced by state and city officials, including Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Behind the commission’s yearlong effort to create a roadmap to improve the city’s ailing criminal justice system was Latham & Watkins. More than 30 lawyers and staffers at the firm spent upward of 3,000 hours supporting the commission’s work. They were led by Lippman and litigation partner Kevin McDonough.

“Latham was the fundamental anchor of the commission,” said commission member Ana Oliveira, president and chief executive officer of The New York Women’s Foundation. “It was a huge undertaking. Latham made it happen.”

The firm’s initial task was to vet the many candidates for the commission and come up with a roster that represented every constituent group.



The Latham team spent the ensuing months tracking down and analyzing extensive data on Rikers’ population—who prisoners were, why they were at the jail, and how long they had lingered there. They also researched jail and prison systems across the country and the globe to determine the most effective approaches, whether they could be replicated in New York, and how much that would cost. Finally, the Latham team compiled data on Rikers Island itself, such as the soil contamination and the impact of nearby LaGuardia Airport, to determine how the site could be repurposed.

Obtaining the necessary information from various authorities and entities alone was a herculean task, Lippman said.

Latham’s work hasn’t ended with the report’s unveiling, however.

“We are equally committed to the implementation stage,” Lippman said. “I am confident that this is going to happen. And I’m confident that we have a long road ahead.”

—KAREN SLOAN

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