

ABC's *Good Morning America*

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8:00:53 a.m. [TEASE]

10 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: "Is Reform Even Possible?"; Trying to Change the System]

MICHAEL STRAHAN: One on one. [TO RICHARDS] Is reform even possible there? My conversation with the newly appointed Department of Corrections commissioner in New York City. How he's trying to change the system.

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8:37:57 a.m. [TEASE]

8 seconds

ROBIN ROBERTS: Coming up, how one man is trying to change the system. Michael's one-on-one with the newly appointed Department of Corrections commissioner here in New York City. Very important story coming up next.

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8:41:22 a.m.

5 minutes and 33 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: One-on-One With NYC Dept of Corrections Commissioner]

STRAHAN: We're going to turn down to one man's hopes and changing the system. I sat down with Stanley Richard, the newly appointed Department of Corrections Commissioner here in New York City and Stanley is breaking barriers as the first formerly incarcerated person to be appointed to the job. We spoke about his mission. I want you to take a look. Beyond these gates is a jail known as one of the world's most dangerous, Rikers Island. There have been complaints of neglect, abuse, and overcrowding.

STANLEY RICHARDS: Hello, hello, hello.

STRAHAN: Stanley Richards, the new commissioner of New York City's Department of Corrections, is tasked with improving conditions. [TO RICHARDS] There have been task forces and independent commissions, the oversight bodies that have called for, you know, fix the problem at Rikers to no avail. Is reform even possible there?

RICHARDS: Oh, absolutely. So, I don't see the dysfunction. I see the possibilities. Will it be hard? Yes, step by step, decision by decision, strategy by strategy. [TO STRAHAN] This is my old housing area.

STRAHAN: Richards understands the harsh reality of life at Rikers Island, because he was once an inmate here himself.

RICHARDS: And all I could see out there was this little yard.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: From Prison Sentence to Prison Reformer]

STRAHAN [TO RICHARDS]: What makes you the right person for this particular job?

RICHARDS: When I look back at my life, spending time on Rikers, one of the things I learned early on in my journey, is that I could be a facilitator of hope to help people understand that they don't have to live the life of cycling in and out of jail in prison.

STRAHAN: After losing his mother at age 10, Richard says he searched for a sense of belonging and purpose, finding it in gang life, a path that led to repeated arrests for drug offenses and robbery, ultimately resulting in a four-and-a-half year prison sentence. [TO RICHARDS] And being that you have a shared experience, does that makes you uniquely qualified for the role?

RICHARDS: So, I see my work as bringing my experience to bear on a system that has been forgotten, and that means making sure that when the judges decide that someone needs to come into our care, we can center our work on dignity, humanity, normalization and reentry, making sure that our officers are valued and cared for and elevated.

STRAHAN [TO RICHARDS]: Yeah, because it seems to be when you think about it one side against the other, here you're trying to show humanity to both sides.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Finding Hope & Humanity for Those Behind Bars]

RICHARDS: To both sides. If I don't see the humanity in our offices, how can I see it in the people in our care? If I don't see the humanity in the people in the care, how can I see it in my community?

STRAHAN: He sees the corrections system that across the country is failing its inmates, one that is too focused on punishment and not enough on rehabilitation, leaving little room for growth, hope, and change. [TO RICHARDS] How do you plan to improve conditions there?

RICHARDS: So, we begin to change the things that are happening in the jails so that people have something to hold on to. So, for example, I'm looking at extending visits to two or three hours, having a movie night on the weekends, having a food selection where the housing area can vote on what they want.

RICHARDS [TO INMATES GARDENING] What made you all sign up for this?

INMATE: We wanted to do something different.

STRAHAN: And adding more programs that teach skills like this one on gardening.

RICHARDS [TO INMATE]: How long have you been a part of it?

INMATE: Since day one.

STRAHAN [TO RICHARDS]: What part of the prison system at the whole do you think is myth understood by the public?

RICHARDS: I think the entire system, because by the time they get to jail or get to prison, we probably missed multiple opportunities to intervene on the school level, on the mental health level, on the drug treatment level. The country's pursuit of punishment has created a system that misses those opportunities.

STRAHAN [TO RICHARDS] And do you think that the population of inmates and prisons are myth understood?

RICHARDS: Yes, we demonize them, because it's easy to justify the pain and suffering and punishment we inflict on them, but if you see them as your brother, your sister, your cousin, your community member, you see them based on the humanity. Maybe you think twice about that.

STRAHAN [TO RICHARDS]: People say, well, there's people who have done some heinous crimes.

RICHARDS: Accountability should be a centerpiece of our justice system. I'm not saying that people shouldn't be accountable.

STRAHAN [TO RICHARDS]: Many people will leave prison, they will re-enter society. How do you prepare them for that?

RICHARDS: I have never met anybody who said, when the day they came up, I can't wait to go back. And so, part of what we need to do is to make sure that we're providing people with the tools that when they get out, they could have a place to live and get the resources they need so they don't come back.

STRAHAN: And Richards has the big task ahead because he's tasked with shutting Rikers down by 2027. He told me that 60 percent of the people incarcerated at Rikers had mental health issues, which guards aren't trained to deal with. One of his goals is to get those folks to a place where they can be better cared for while serving out their sentence and because they're understaffed, they want to get better pay for the guard for course and hire more so that everyone can feel more safe.

LARA SPENCER: Yeah.

ROBERTS: Oh, absolutely.

STRAHAN: Yeah.

ROBERTS: Well, I hope that people really listen to his perspective because he has one unlike many in that position.

STRAHAN: Yeah, I agree.

ROBERTS: And about re-entry.

STRAHAN: Yeah.

ROBERTS: Well, are we able to re-enter society?

STRAHAN: He's an example. He's been on both sides. He's been in Riker —

SPENCER: Yeah, that's the amazing part of the story.

STRAHAN: — and now he's on the outside in the law enforcement side. Alright, thank you.