Incarceration is NOT a Joke!

Did you know that:

- New Orleans has the highest jail incarceration rate of any city in the United States.
- Louisiana has the highest prison incarceration rate of any state in the United States.
- The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world.
- 64% of those incarcerated in Louisiana are serving time for nonviolent offenses.
- 1 of 7 African American men in New Orleans are under control of the criminal justice system, i.e., in jail, awaiting trial, or on probation or parole. Nationally the figure is 1 of 10.

But these are just numbers. They can’t begin to measure the human cost of incarceration. Families are torn apart. Lives are broken.

Many incarcerated individuals suffer from mental illness and substance abuse issues. Instead of treatment, the State of Louisiana closes down hospitals, slashes educational funding and fills our jails and prisons.

Louisiana’s culture of incarceration is killing us, economically, socially and spiritually. Years of over-incarceration have not made us a safe city, state or nation.

And the conditions in which we hold people aren’t a joke either.

Since April, 2006, 42 people have died in custody of the Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office (OPSO), many under highly questionable circumstances. The Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) is now under a federal consent decree because of conditions that “offend contemporary notions of human decency.” Federal judge Lance Africk has described our jail as “an indelible stain on the community....”
We realize this fund-raising event is intended to raise money for our state museums, which is a worthy project. **However, the premise of this event, that it is fun to have a make-believe “arresting experience”... “incarcerated for one night only”, is in incredibly bad taste, given all the lost and damaged lives and suffering of individuals held in our jail in recent years.** The fact that this event is sponsored by the Louisiana Museum Foundation and headlines the “criminal masterminds” of our Lt. Governor and the President of our City Council, is especially troubling.

We realize that many people of good-will are probably unaware of how insensitive this theme is to the serious harm that real-life, not make-believe, incarceration has caused to so many people in our community.

We ask you to consider the larger context of this event and:

1. Learn about the pressing issues facing our City with regard to over-incarceration and the need for adequate funding of the OPP consent decree.
   - Louisiana Incarcerated: Investigative series: nola.com/prisons

2. If you contribute financially to the Museum Foundation, please consider making a matching donation to Vera Institute of Justice’s New Orleans Pre-Trial Services and/or the Orleans Public Defenders.
   - Vera Institute: vera.org/project/new-orleans-pretrial-services
   - Orleans Public Defenders: opdla.org

3. Support community efforts to bring about lasting change and meaningful reforms to a criminal justice system that is broken and in desperate need of change.

4. Urge the La. Museum Foundation to fund and support an in-state traveling exhibit and lecture series about the history and impact of incarceration in the State of Louisiana.

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