

NYC Council's Response to the Blueprint to Close Rikers: Immediate Action Steps for City Government

APRIL 2025



RIKERS ISLAND

The Independent Rikers Commission's *Blueprint to Close Rikers* charts a path to safely and permanently close Rikers and successfully transition to a more effective and safer borough-based jail system. It clearly identifies that everyone responsible for the criminal justice and incarceration systems in New York City must now, and in the future, provide strong leadership and initiative. In response, the Council is outlining the immediate action steps by New York City government that are necessary to progress towards this goal, including commitments required of the mayoral administration and the Council. These include administrative, budgetary, and legislative actions.

Administrative Actions

There are several steps that the Mayor's Office, its relevant city agencies, and the City Council must take to advance progress towards the closure of Rikers.

TWO FULL-TIME LEADERS

The mayoral administration must appoint two senior point people to lead the overall effort: a full-time senior staff member at City Hall (legislation below establishes requirement) and a full-time senior staff member at the Department of Correction (DOC) whose sole mission is preparing the agency to transition to the borough facilities.



STAFF OUTPOSTED THERAPEUTIC HOSPITAL UNITS

Three sets of outposted therapeutic beds at public hospitals – Bellevue, Woodhull, and North-Central Bronx Hospitals – totaling approximately 360 beds were all originally meant to be completed by 2024. Construction on the first set of approximately 100 beds has just been finished, two years later than initially expected, and Woodhull and North-Central Bronx Hospitals will not be ready until 2028. DOC has yet to commit the staff necessary to open the Bellevue beds, contending that the personnel are needed on Rikers. This threatens to prevent the most ill people in Rikers from receiving the specialized care they routinely need – and to continue to significantly burden jail-based staff with having to transport people back and forth to the hospital. The Administration and DOC must immediately reorganize staff as necessary to ensure the Bellevue outposted units open within the next few months, after correctional and health care staff have had the opportunity to properly train together on the new units. This is critical to reducing the number of people inappropriately held in traditional jail beds.

SUPPORT OF COURT INITIATIVE TO REDUCE CASE DELAYS AND EXCESS JAIL POPULATION

The New York State Office of Court Administration (OCA) is undertaking serious, comprehensive case processing reforms to significantly speed up cases that are projected to reduce the jail population by up to 2,000 people within three-to-five years. The ability of OCA's initiative to achieve its maximum potential depends on relevant stakeholders' full cooperation. This includes city government prioritizing the following issues:

- ▶ **Fully Staff NYPD Discovery Units:** The NYPD must fully staff its discovery liaison units to ensure the police department hands over all required evidence to prosecutors in a timely manner, while easing the burden on beat officers and detectives.
- ▶ **Ensure Available Technology for Evidence Review:** The mayoral administration must fully collaborate to ensure rapid implementation of technology to facilitate the review and transfer of evidence between NYPD, district attorneys, and defense lawyers. Tens of millions of dollars have already been allocated to district attorneys and public defender offices for this technology over the past several years, but only now is it starting to be implemented. DOC must also ensure incarcerated people have the technological capability to securely review the evidence in their cases, such as via the tablets DOC provides to those in its custody.



- ▶ **Provide Timely Medical and Crime Lab Testing:** The mayoral administration must ensure the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and NYPD crime lab provide testing on a timely basis, helped by improved hiring and retention practices.
- ▶ **Expand Community-Based Mental Health and Addiction Programs:** The continuous expansion of community-based programs and services for people with serious mental illness and addiction, especially for those experiencing homelessness, will provide judges with strong, appropriate diversion options that help speed up case resolutions. Many of these are highlighted in the city budgetary priorities outlined below. Others, like forensic psychiatric hospital beds and greater mental health court programs, require increased support from the State.

EXPAND 6-A WORK RELEASE PROGRAM

To help reduce cycles of recidivism, the City should make greater use of Article 6-A of New York Correction Law. It allows DOC to put a limited number of people serving a sentence of less than a year, known as a City sentence, who meet relatively narrow criteria on a work release program for the tail end of their sentence, a supervised landing back in the community. Instead of incarcerating someone for a four-to-eight month sentence and then releasing them with no supervision and often no support, the 6-A Work Release Program would release them with supervision, check-in requirements, and connections to recidivism-reduction programs. Individuals who fail to comply or are arrested would be immediately reincarcerated. Over the past several years, DOC has achieved success using the program – of the 115 people released under 6-A between 2022 and 2024, only six were returned to Rikers, and all in 2022. However, in 2024, DOC only used the program for 43 people, out of the 2,745 who served City sentences over the course of the year. The City should carefully expand its use, with individualized release decisions. The newly re-established Local Conditional Release Commission is a strong vehicle to craft smart re-entry plans for this population and electronic monitoring could be introduced where appropriate as an additional security measure.

REDUCE PLANNED JAIL BEDS FOR WOMEN

The City increased the number of jail beds for women at the new Queens jail from its initial total of 126 to 450, reducing the number of men's beds in Queens commensurately. There are 430 women incarcerated on Rikers today, but 83% have a mental illness and 35% with a serious mental illness.



With the reforms and investments to more appropriately treat people with mental health issues and effective solutions for women and gender-expansive people, it is very reasonable to forecast that 225 women would remain in jails. Therefore, the City could cut the number of planned jail beds for women in the Queens facility to approximately 250, while maintaining operational flexibility to use the excess space to house men, as needed.

INVEST IN STRENGTHENED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR JAIL STAFF

The mayoral administration should strongly support efforts to improve DOC with enhanced management, revised policies and practices, revamped recruitment and hiring, and better professional development and support for staff. It's important that these changes also incorporate the perspectives of staff.

- **Transform a Current Jail into a Laboratory for a Model:** Within the next six months, the mayoral administration and DOC should focus on transforming one of the existing jails on Rikers into a laboratory for developing a model jail that is more effective and safe. Policies and practices for this jail should be jointly developed by a range of stakeholders, from correction officers, healthcare and civilian staff, and their unions, to currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families, service providers, attorneys, and others. Input, training, and support could be procured from jail and prison systems outside of New York City, and from correction experts. Other NYC bureaucracies with better track records of ensuring essential posts are fully staffed, like Sanitation and FDNY, could provide guidance and insights about responsive staffing. Adequate resources and a reasonable timeframe to test what works are key, and private funding could be leveraged to spur innovation. Ideas to explore in this effort include:

- Assigning staff to work steady assignments on steady teams with steady supervisors.
- Provide mentorship of correction officers, captains, and other supervisors, including with outside mentors, and leadership training for captains and supervisors.
- Provide incentives for positive staff performance and establish regular performance evaluations for staff with their direct supervisors, tying them to promotion decisions.
- Provide incarcerated people with opportunities to earn privileges for good behavior and participation in programming.



- Ensure swift, certain, consistent and graduated discipline for staff and incarcerated people that is more effective than the uncertain prospect of harsh punishment.
- Try 10-hour shifts, fewer days a week, rather than the current eight-hour shifts, as studies show it to be better for staff.
- Offer Crisis Intervention Training to many more staff, enhancing their ability to work with people with serious mental illness.
- Provide incarcerated people with more individual choice and responsibility, modeled after best practices in Pennsylvania and European correctional facilities.

- ▶ **High Reliability Organization:** DOC should implement changes that foster a standardized culture by becoming a High Reliability Organization (HRO), defined as complex, high-stakes organizations that could be easily prone to disaster yet largely avoid accidents and mistakes (i.e. well-run hospitals). Staff in HROs learn their roles and can perform relatively interchangeably, so transfers between units do not require a different approach for the same issues. This would help DOC maintain effective decision-making and enable learning from past mistakes to avoid recurrences.
- ▶ **Pursue Correctional and Health Care Accreditation:** DOC should work to secure correctional and health care accreditation by organizations like the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC). A recent study found jails that earned NCCHC accreditation improved significantly – mortality dropped by 85% in the six months after the completed certification process, staff communicated better, felt better trained and more valued at work, and returns to jail dropped 13% three months after release and 21% after six months.
- ▶ **Staff Wellness and Support:** Correction officers and other jail-based staff have incredibly difficult and stressful jobs that are often thankless. They need better support, including for mental health, because work-related stress and trauma negatively impacts their health, work performance, and family life. Jail-based staff should be provided greater mental health support beyond access to DOC CARE, which some officers have indicated they do not trust as remaining confidential and feel usage could impact their careers. Staff should have access to impartial service providers unaffiliated with DOC and standard operating procedures should be created to connect officers to care immediately after they are involved in a traumatic incident.



The Council enacted Local Law 23 of 2025 to assert that DOC should provide staff with access to mental health resources related to stress and other adverse mental health impacts in response to their being subjected to sexual assault and harassment. However, DOC and other agencies should do more to support jail-based staff.

- ▶ **Accountability and Discipline:** DOC should implement more effective accountability systems for officers and incarcerated people, adopting best practices that utilize incentives and rewards for positive behavior and swift, certain, graduated discipline for misconduct. This approach has proven to be more effective than deferred or potential severe punishment. Staff should be recognized and rewarded for helpful initiative, de-escalation, and leadership.
- ▶ **Recruitment and Retention:** DOC has been facing unsustainable levels of attrition over the past few years, without adequate hiring – between January 2022 and October 2024, DOC graduated 557 uniformed staff from the academy, but 2,325 left the department. While the borough-based jails will not require as many staff, losing staff at the current rate will be very detrimental. The department must take innovative approaches to attract more people to the job, considering changes to shift schedules that allow employees to work condensed workweeks and positioning a career in DOC as a step on a broader professional journey. New York City and New York State should work with unions and their members to develop educational and career support incentives for people who stay in key positions for three to five years.
- ▶ **Training:** DOC should provide crisis intervention training for officers, given the number of officers with this training declined during the COVID-19 pandemic. DOC should also pursue best practices training outside of the department from correctional experts and more effective systems nationally and internationally.

PURSUE UNUTILIZED METHODS TO EXPEDITE NEW JAIL CONSTRUCTION

Per the Department of Design and Construction, the City can speed up jail construction by approximately one year if it took full advantage of the design-build process being used. On other local design-build projects, such as those run by the Port Authority, the architects and construction firms work as a team to start construction on foundations and building exteriors even while interior designs are being finalized.



The City is not using this approach, adding one year to the timeline for each jail. Lessons learned from the Brooklyn jail, which is the furthest along, can be used to mitigate risk and speed construction for the other three jails. Construction can also likely be further sped up by using value engineering, which engages outside experts to conduct comprehensive reviews of construction, timeline, and program plans. It has been used by the Mayor's Office of Management and Budget for decades, reducing 15% of construction costs and months off completion dates for other projects.

PROHIBIT DEADLOCKING OF PEOPLE WITH SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS

The use of isolation, currently implemented through Enhanced Supervision Housing, has often been blamed for the rise in violence at Rikers. Even before solitary confinement and isolation were restricted by state law, the levels of violence at Rikers were already so egregious as to be ruled unconstitutional by the Federal Court in Nunez. Allegations have emerged about the use of "deadlocking" for people with SMI, where people are locked in their cells for days and sometimes weeks straight after some level of misconduct or perceived threat. This practice allegedly took place in specialized units for people with SMI, including those so ill they were not competent to stand trial and only remained at Rikers because of the lack of space in State psychiatric hospitals. As a result, people would not receive medication or treatment, and health care staff reported seeing them profoundly decompensated. New DOC and Correctional Health Service policies should be implemented to prohibit this practice.

ESTABLISH COUNCIL-LED WORKING GROUP TO REGULARLY CONVENE STAKEHOLDERS

The City Council has played a leading role in advancing investments and policy changes to support the closure of Rikers and establishment of a safer jail system for the City. The Council will establish a Close Rikers Working Group, consisting of members and staff, that regularly meets to ensure consistent oversight and progress on the plan to close Rikers. It will be led by the Speaker's office, Criminal Justice Committee, and other relevant committees and staff. It will partner with the Lippman Commission to convene the various criminal justice system stakeholders responsible for the solutions necessary to advance the plan on a quarterly basis to ensure collaborative status tracking, problem solving, and other work to maintain progress towards closure. Stakeholders shall include city district attorney offices, the Mayor's Office, OCA, the Governor's Office, the State Legislature, representatives of public defenders and defense attorneys, providers of mental health, addiction, and recidivism-reduction programs.



WELCOME LOCAL SITING OF HOUSING AND SERVICES

Borough Presidents, Community Boards, Council Members, and New Yorkers must welcome local siting of housing and services for people with justice involvement. Every neighborhood must do its part in these efforts to advance public safety. These sitings should coincide with community-led investments that improve quality of life in neighborhoods through economic development, parks, affordable housing and healthcare access. The City should also partner with community organizations to dispel misconceptions and myths about these sitings and build positive relationships.

Budgetary Actions

The following investments were identified as immediately needed to provide the necessary infrastructure and solutions to progress the closure of Rikers. The Council will negotiate their inclusion in the Fiscal Year 2026 City Budget.

ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION RESTORATION

Many of the programs funded by the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice help to prevent crime and reduce recidivism. Yet, the Administration has cut funding for some of these programs in the most recent November Financial Plan. The Council calls on the Administration to reverse these cuts and to restore \$8.9 million in Fiscal 2026 for Alternative to Incarceration programs that provide services tailored to participants, which can help reduce unnecessary incarceration and recidivism.

DISTRICT ATTORNEYS

The District Attorneys and the Special Narcotics Prosecutor are essential components of the City's criminal justice system. Many of the DA's offices have stated that they do not have appropriate staffing to properly deal with all of their responsibilities. Additionally, because of pay levels, the prosecutors' offices often have issues related to the retention of attorneys. Retention is important, as it helps to prevent case delays that can increase the length of stays in the City's jail system. In order for prosecutors' offices to fulfill their responsibilities, the Council calls on the Administration to provide approximately \$50 million to the offices in Fiscal 2026.

ELECTRONIC MONITORING CAPACITY INCREASE

The Council is supportive of all policies that reduce the number of people who are unnecessarily detained in the City's correctional system.



Stakeholders in the justice system agree that a certain portion of people held in New York City's jails have an appropriate risk profile to be safely released to community supervision, with the additional oversight provided by electronic monitoring. Currently, the Department of Probation has the capacity to electronically monitor 400 people. To further reduce the number of people unnecessarily held in correctional facilities, the Council calls on the Administration to double the City's current electronic monitoring capacity to 800 monitors. Providing \$10.6 million for 400 additional bracelets will allow for more people, who would otherwise be held in custody, to remain in their homes and communities, lowering the population and recidivism. It is a vital step towards closing Rikers Island, and should only be expanded for those who otherwise would be detained pre-trial.

SUPERVISED RELEASE INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT PILOT EXPANSION

The City has initiated a Pre-Trial Supervised Release Intensive Case Management (ICM) pilot program that provides intensive case management and connection to services, therapy, and treatment for people with serious mental illness and addiction issues who were arrested and released pre-trial. Initial indications show the pilot has produced positive results and has benefited people who are not responsive to traditional supervised release programs. In order to build on this success, the City should expand Intensive Case Management to all boroughs. The Council calls on the Administration to expand this pilot, providing an additional \$46 million to connect more people with serious mental illness and addiction issues with services, to ensure they come to court, and keep them from re-offending.

INTENSIVE MOBILE TREATMENT STEP-DOWN PROGRAM

To appropriately address the wait lists for Intensive Mobile Treatment programs and strength the continuum of care, the Council calls on the Administration to allocate \$30 million in the Fiscal 2026 budget for the creation of a pilot step-down program for clients who have progressed in their recovery and require less-intensive services, as well as to expand IMT teams.

ASSERTIVE COMMUNITY TREATMENT STEP-DOWN PROGRAM

The Council supports the allocation of \$7 million in Fiscal 2026 for the creation of a step-down program for Assertive Community Treatment clients who have progressed in their recovery and require less-intensive services, or to support expansion of ACT teams.



By moving stabilized patients to step-down programs, Assertive Community Treatment teams can support their continued mental health improvement and stability, while opening Assertive Community Treatment spaces for new clients in urgent need. This increased community-based care ultimately reduces hospitalizations and justice system involvement for those in need of mental healthcare.

JUSTICE INVOLVED SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

The Council calls on the Administration to allocate an additional \$26.6 million to enhance Justice Involved Supportive Housing (JISH) to fulfill the City's previous commitment to provide 500 supportive housing units for individuals leaving Rikers. JISH can reduce recidivism by providing stability and successful reentry for those transitioning from incarceration and at risk of homelessness, preventing their entry into homeless shelters. This allocation would increase service funding rates for new and existing supportive housing units to adequately fund the existing 120 units and fulfill the prior commitment for an additional 380 units that the City has been unable to find providers for due to insufficient funding for the program. JISH is currently the only designated supportive housing program in the City for people exiting Rikers. It is estimated that the need for JISH exceeds 2,500 units, but the current funding gap has undermined the program's ability to help reduce recidivism and facilitate successful reentry, in violation of the Close Rikers points of agreement.

RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT BEDS

In order to lower the Rikers population and meet the targets set in the legislation to close Rikers Island, the City must increase its investment in programs that provide treatment for people with serious mental illness and with co-occurring addictions. There is currently only one residential program in New York City specializing in treating this population, but there is currently an extensive wait list to enter the program. To provide services to this vulnerable population and to reduce their chances of ending up in correctional facilities, the Council calls on the Administration to allocate \$6.3 million in Fiscal 2026 to create 250 new residential treatment beds.

Legislative Action

There are several policy changes identified in *The Blueprint to Close Rikers* that are needed needed to progress the closure of Rikers. The Council will advance the following pieces of legislation to enact them:

INTRODUCTION 1100**SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER CARLINA RIVERA**

This legislation would require the Department of Social Services to include single adults or adult families and families with children where the head of household has a severe mental illness, substance use disorder, or both, is homeless or at risk of homelessness, and has had justice system involvement in the last 12 months to any eligibility parameters for any existing supportive housing program administered and wholly funded by the city.

INTRODUCTION 1238**SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER JENNIFER GUTIÉRREZ**

This legislation would require the Department of Correction (DOC) to ensure all persons in custody with a pending criminal proceeding have the technology and support necessary to securely receive and review case evidence via a department-issued tablet or through access provided in the law library.

INTRODUCTION 1240**SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER RITA JOSEPH**

This legislation would require the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) to establish a holistic needs assessment program to identify mental health, physical health, substance abuse, intellectual disabilities, domestic violence and abuse history, history of trauma, emotional dysregulation, and other psychosocial conditions or circumstances at the time of a person's arrest.

INTRODUCTION 1242**SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER SANDY NURSE**

This legislation would require the establishment of an Office of Coordinator for Rikers Island Closure with a full-time coordinator and dedicated staff that reports directly to the Mayor.

INTRODUCTION 1038**SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER SANDY NURSE**

This legislation would require the Department of Citywide Administrative Services to submit a master plan for the redevelopment of Rikers Island for sustainability and resiliency purposes (Renewable Rikers).



INTRODUCTION 1241

SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER SANDY NURSE

This legislation would require the Department of Correction to conduct a study to determine any inefficiencies in the early release program established in accordance with Article 6A of the New York State Correction Law that permits sentenced individuals to be released from jail and serve the remainder of their sentence at home, under supervision.

Recent Council Actions

Under Speaker Adrienne Adams' leadership since 2022, the Council has successfully enacted new laws and secured funding for programs that promote solutions to help progress the closure of Rikers. They include the following items:

INTRODUCTION 806-A (LOCAL LAW 75/2024)

SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER CARLINA RIVERA

This legislation requires the establishment of a jail population review program to identify people in custody of the Department of Correction ("DOC") whose cases could be resolved or who could be safely released into community-based programs. The Council also secured a \$10 million investment to fund the jail population review program in Fiscal Year 2025.

INTRODUCTION 1094 (LOCAL LAW 149/2023)

SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER CARLINA RIVERA

This legislation requires DOC to record interactions in which an individual in custody is informed about a scheduled court appearance and to report on rates of court production. This aims to address failures to produce individuals for their court appearances, which contribute to case delays, increased lengths of jail stay, and an inflated jail population.

INTRODUCTION 1203 (LOCAL LAW 36/2024)

SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER KEVIN RILEY

This legislation requires DOC to provide a letter of incarceration, also known as discharge papers, to every person released from its custody. This document is necessary to regain access to public benefits, such as Medicaid and Social Security, and DOC previously did not automatically provide it to people when released.



RESOLUTION 371

SPONSORED BY COUNCIL MEMBER CRYSTAL HUDSON

This legislation calls on the New York State Legislature to pass, and the Governor to sign S6643A/A9115, in relation to providing money upon release for certain incarcerated individuals.

COUNCIL OVERSIGHT

In recent years, the Council's Committee on Criminal Justice has held oversight hearings that examined violence reduction, suicide prevention, the treatment of TGNCNBI people in custody, court production, reentry services, the construction of outposted therapeutic housing units, education and alternative incarceration programs, sexual assault prevention, and several other topics that relate to operations of the Department of Correction and the planned transition to the borough-based jails.

- ▶ The Council's Fiscal 2024 Budget Response called on the Administration to provide \$195 million for legal service providers, including public defenders, to adequately provide free court representation to low-income New Yorkers in criminal and civil matters. The Fiscal 2024 Executive Plan included \$23.1 million to support additional funding for contracted legal service providers. The Fiscal 2024 Adopted Budget included \$46 million in additional funding for legal service providers.
- ▶ The Council's Fiscal 2025 Budget Response called on the Administration to baseline \$1.5 million for the Board of Correction to hire 20 new positions. A portion of funding was reflected in the Adopted Budget, as the Administration provided \$312,491 in Fiscal 2025 for three positions.
- ▶ In the Fiscal 2025 Adopted Budget, \$9.1 million was added for Discharge Planning through City Council initiative funding, including \$2.7 million to DYCD for re-entry services and \$6.4 million to DOHMH for Justice Involved Supportive Housing services.
- ▶ New Units of Appropriation (U/As) represent the Council expanding the use of its budgetary powers in a new way that facilitates better control and oversight of agency spending. In Fiscal 2023, the Council doubled the number of U/As for DOC from four to eight. Then, in Fiscal 2024, the Council added two more for transportation, a core agency function. In the Fiscal 2025 Adopted Budget, the Council successfully added another new U/A for the Administration-Academy and Training program area to break out those costs and provide better transparency in DOC personal services spending.