

Thank you, Council Member Hudson, for the introduction, and for your leadership and dedication to our city.

I want to acknowledge some of our citywide and statewide leaders here with us today.

My friend and mentor, Attorney General Letitia James.

Mayor Eric Adams.

Public Advocate Jumaane Williams.

And Comptroller Brad Lander.

I also want to thank my leadership team:

Deputy Speaker Diana Ayala, Majority Leader Amanda Farias, Majority Whip Selvena Brooks-Powers, and Council Members Justin Brannan, Keith Powers, Carlina Rivera, Rafael Salamanca, and Sandra Ung.

And, of course, all my colleagues in the Council who have joined us today, and our hardworking staff who are dedicated public servants.

I also want to thank our partners in labor, our social-service providers, our non-profits, and our community-based organizations for all you do on the frontlines in our city.

[PAUSE]

Thank you all for being here today at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, home to inclusive and world-renowned art for over 160 years.

It's fitting that we've gathered here because our arts and cultural institutions are the heartbeat of our city.

While history can tell us what took place, art reveals the details in-between – the buried stories of how ordinary people persevere through uncertain and changing times.

It allows those of us who are often excluded from the dominant narrative to write and celebrate our own stories – and shape our own futures.

We see this on stages at BAM and the other institutions that make up the cultural hub in these surrounding blocks of Brooklyn.

Art gives us the courage to dream and the strength to break the boundaries that confine us.

[PAUSE]

This is only possible when the City provides support for our arts and cultural institutions of all sizes.

It was at BAM where legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey first debuted as a young dancer in 1956.

He centered Black liberation and joy, reflecting this beauty back to audiences at a time when segregation prevailed.

Through their support, members of the community made sure this revolutionary art saw another day.

That's what our institutions need now. Funding for cultural institutions must be a priority in our upcoming city budget. As patrons, New Yorkers should also support them through memberships and donations.

Our beloved institutions have an outsized role in the strength of our economy, generating \$110 billion for our city.

If we want to remain the world's cultural capital, our city must make the necessary investments so that these institutions, and our stories, can exist now – and in the future.

[PAUSE]

While we work to strengthen this critical sector, we must also double down on investments that provide stability for the people of this city.

New Yorkers need affordable housing, healthcare, childcare, education, and reliable government services that allow families to thrive. But over the years, these building blocks that make our city livable have been diminished.

We need to make sure those who keep our city running – our essential workers, artists, entrepreneurs, small business owners, and everyone in between – can afford to live and work in the city they love.

[PAUSE]

For too many New Yorkers, the housing and affordability crisis has presented an impossible dilemma: you cannot afford to live in the city, so you struggle or you leave.

The situation is dire.

We are losing working- and middle-class families, who are leaving New York at the fastest rate of any New Yorkers.

What this tells us is that as a government, we are not fulfilling our duty to New Yorkers.

[PAUSE]

This crisis is disproportionately devastating our Black communities, and other communities of color.

In just two decades, our city's Black population has decreased by nearly 10 percent.

That translates to 200,000 Black New Yorkers, often driven out by skyrocketing rents and dwindling homeownership opportunities.

Without a path to build equity, longtime New Yorkers are moving elsewhere to build their legacies.

We must make New York livable for all. If we don't, we'll lose the very backbone of our city and the diversity that powers us.

We can and must do better.

[PAUSE]

As a native New Yorker who grew up in Southeast Queens, I know the possibilities and the promise this city holds. Through good union jobs, my parents were able to enter the middle-class and create a stable life for my sister and me.

But what was possible then is too often out-of-reach now.

Today, nearly a quarter of New Yorkers cannot afford necessities like food and housing. One in four children in our city is living in poverty.

The pandemic and an unequal recovery have exacerbated economic hardships, while a lack of capacity within our city agencies has undermined access to assistance that families could once rely on.

This does not have to be our reality.

We know our government can work because it has before.

We've got to get back to basics – strengthen our city government to work for all New Yorkers.

[PAUSE]

There are tools within our reach to help combat our city's intersecting crises.

Housing is a key determinant of health and safety, and one of the best ways we can help New Yorkers secure stability.

That's why the Council has made affordable housing production a top priority. Last year, we enacted my Fair Housing Framework law to establish local housing production targets. The expectation must be for every district to equitably contribute to addressing the housing crisis.

Every one of us, and the communities we represent, have an equal responsibility.

[PAUSE]

I am prepared to lead by example.

In my own district in Southeast Queens, the Aqueduct Racetrack – a 172-acre, state-owned site – will soon no longer host horseracing.

This presents a generational opportunity to transform this site into housing and homeownership, open space, and new community amenities.

Adjacent to this property is one of the largest parcels of vacant, city-owned land that sits right beside the A train, which makes it a valuable opportunity for transit-oriented housing.

I look forward to working with our state partners and all stakeholders to help us seize the opportunity and gain the benefits from unlocking these possibilities.

Repurposing the land for housing and other amenities can uplift this community district – which has produced the lowest amount of housing of any in Queens.

Let's deliver the homes that Southeast Queens and all New Yorkers deserve.

[PAUSE]

Libraries are the cornerstone of our communities. We need to fully fund them in the budget so New Yorkers continue benefiting from their services.

Instead of pulling back from these neighborhood anchors, the City should find ways to enhance libraries and leverage them for housing.

The Council will work with all stakeholders, including the city's three library systems, to support housing development opportunities on existing library branches and city-owned land.

Building on previous efforts to expand their reach presents an opportunity to modernize our library branches for New Yorkers and create new community spaces like early childhood education centers.

By building homes connected to the pillars of our communities, we can create self-sufficient ecosystems that enable all of us to thrive – together.

[PAUSE]

As we confront our city's housing crisis, we will work with the Administration, communities, and all stakeholders when the Zoning for Housing Opportunity text amendment comes before the Council to update decades-old zoning laws that have maintained racial segregation and impeded housing creation.

In tandem with the text amendment, we will push to deepen affordability so that homes are created for New Yorkers with the greatest needs. The Council will also explore using zoning incentives to increase the use of housing vouchers in private developments.

It is imperative that Albany provides funding and tax incentives to help us achieve truly affordable housing and prevent New Yorkers from being priced out.

[PAUSE]

When we talk about housing, we cannot forget about homeownership. Owning a home allows families to remain in the city while building generational wealth and equity.

Historically, homeownership has been a pathway of mobility for working-class families. But today, it has practically disappeared.

As a government, we must restore this opportunity.

The Council will consider policy changes to double the City's production of affordable homeownership opportunities, which can keep families in our city and close the racial wealth gap.

At the same time, we must protect existing homeowners from predatory practices that prey on older adults and family members who are left with these prized assets.

To combat deed theft, we will pursue legislation requiring speculators to disclose fair market rates of property and the City to create a program that helps people manage inherited properties.

The Council will also partner with the city's law schools and community organizations to offer free estate planning, because creating a will is key to keeping homes within a family.

We must build a city where all New Yorkers, especially working people who make up the backbone of our communities, can build their legacy right here in our city.

[PAUSE]

Early childhood education must also be an equal priority to keep families in our city.

Raising a child is a full-time job, but more than 80 percent of families cannot afford full-time childcare. This has been devastating to our economy, resulting in twenty-three billion dollars in economic activity lost in 2022.

With a lack of affordable childcare options and a weakened 3-K system, working and middle-class families are feeling they have no choice but to leave this city to provide their children with a better life.

Now is the time to renew our promise to New Yorkers and deepen our commitment to the City's 3-K and early childhood education programs. Our children need us.

[PAUSE]

Early childhood education supports long-term development in children and enables parents to pursue greater career opportunities. It is especially critical for working women, who overwhelmingly shoulder the responsibility of caregiving.

Yet, funding cuts and bureaucratic challenges in the management of 3-K has weakened the program, leaving families in doubt.

Last year, the Council secured funding to fix inefficiencies and gaps in the program by expanding access to full-day and full-year slots that better serve working parents.

The DOE must implement these solutions to stabilize the program immediately and protect the promise in its expansion.

Early childhood programs are a safeguard against a departing middle class and a tool to end the vicious cycle that depletes our student population and school funding.

We need to support children and families so they can grow their futures here.

[PAUSE]

The sunseting of federal stimulus funds is such a challenge, but we must meet it head-on to help students recover from historic, pandemic-era learning loss.

It will require the City and State to increase investments in essential programs – like Community Schools, special education pre-school, restorative justice, and other programs – that help our students.

Now is not the time to leave our children behind. They need our support to recover from the challenges caused and horrifically exacerbated by the pandemic.

[PAUSE]

Mental health is among the biggest of those challenges.

In our city, one in six children experience a mental health condition, and suicide is the second leading cause of death.

With the stigma around mental health, it's on us to make it easy for young people to access the help they need.

We must provide mental health support in schools, where our students spend most of their time, and work with families to access treatment for their loved ones.

[PAUSE]

Young people can benefit from peer-to-peer support, and we need to empower students with the right resources.

This year, the Council will introduce new laws requiring the City to develop and provide peer-to-peer mental health training for students and toolkits on how to start a wellness group.

This approach is impactful. We will seek to provide support from CUNY Social Work students and fund a new youth peer support program.

[PAUSE]

To develop inclusive policies that yield results, we need to listen to our young people.

The Council's reconvening of the Young Women's Initiative last year, building on former Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito's efforts, identified these clear priorities.

It also illuminated the lack of information on reproductive health and bodily autonomy. The City should revamp how sexual education is taught in public schools.

Today, I'm announcing the Council will examine sexual health education in schools and scrutinize whether recommendations from the 2018 Taskforce have been implemented. We will also consider legislation requiring the City to conduct an education and outreach campaign in coordination with young people.

Our youth leaders also called on the City to update nutrition curriculum in schools, moving away from a focus on physical appearance towards one that facilitates healthy relationships with food.

We will follow young people's leadership to help reach our collective goal of a healthier city for all.

[PAUSE]

Youth mental health is the next phase of the Council's Mental Health Roadmap.

We followed through on its initial phases by expanding proven community-based care programs that prevent crises and promote safer communities.

To build out an efficient infrastructure of care, we must continue to focus on fixing our government's patchwork system that worsens mental health challenges.

The City has relied too much on emergency and crisis responses when we need a strong, grounded infrastructure that prioritizes prevention, care, and treatment.

The current approach is expensive, dehumanizing, and ineffective. In too many cases, it's been deadly.

[PAUSE]

New Yorkers are falling through the cracks because they are bouncing between systems that are ill-equipped to help them.

Nothing is more demoralizing than building up the courage to seek care, only to be told, “Sorry, we can’t help you.” The same goes for providers who want to help, but realize their hands are tied.

When this happens repeatedly, you end up with a system like ours, where too often, instead of mental health care, struggling New Yorkers end up being repeatedly cycled through the criminal legal system.

They are then released worse off after not receiving the help they need, and without any progress towards addressing the root issue.

To support New Yorkers’ sense of safety in the subways and throughout our city, we must delve into the root causes and fix our systems of care.

[PAUSE]

When over half of the people in our jails have a mental health diagnosis, it should be clear what we must fix to close Rikers and stop it from undermining safety in our city.

In the short term, we must deepen our commitment to strengthening Forensic Assertive Community Treatment teams. These evidence-based solutions provide coordinated behavioral health and social services for individuals with justice involvement and serious mental health challenges.

The State must significantly expand mental health courts and their services to reduce the months-long wait time that fails to connect people to appropriate services.

We also need more therapeutic hospital beds, which must be implemented without further delay.

By prioritizing these responses, we can meet New Yorkers where they are and improve the health and the safety of our communities.

[PAUSE]

Investments in mental health make all New Yorkers safer, but other safety solutions are equally important.

The Council has put crime victims at the heart of our efforts. We’ve established New York State’s first trauma recovery centers in our city to support underserved victims of violence, including gun violence that tears apart our communities.

For too long, neighborhoods most affected by violence have gone without the proper investments. While these centers mark a new beginning of prioritizing survivors and

opening paths to recovery, sustaining them will require support beyond the Council, but also from the City and the State.

[PAUSE]

Safety also means supporting women and birthing people of color, whose lives are threatened by persistent health disparities.

As the first Black Speaker of the New York City Council, and the first mother and grandmother to hold this position, the issue of maternal health is near and dear to my heart.

Black New Yorkers are eight times more likely than white New Yorkers to die from a pregnancy-related illness.

These aren't just statistics. Each loss represents a mother, family, and community devastated by preventable harm and trauma.

In an unprecedented 11-bill legislative package, the Council enacted laws requiring the City to train doulas and provide their services in marginalized communities at no cost, among other interventions.

We must build on this progress.

The Administration must promptly deliver the required report on this doula initiative in June, and use its recommendations to improve the permanent program.

Families need the City to get this right.

[PAUSE]

Mothers are the heart and soul of our communities, and when our mothers are healthy, so are their children and families.

Becoming a parent is a transformative experience, but for many, its joys can be followed by grief and uncertainty.

Too many suffer in silence because of the guilt that comes with this ambivalence – but many things can be true at once.

We need to support mothers and parents with post-partum care.

The Council will seek legislation to launch a program that addresses fourth trimester mental health issues. We will also support expansion of post-birth nurse visits and the creation of a psychologist position at maternal health departments in public hospitals.

As a women-majority Council made up of many new parents, this is personal to us.

By drawing from our own experiences of vulnerability, we can holistically support our neighbors and fellow New Yorkers.

[PAUSE]

We must also confront the rise in hate crimes. It's on us as New Yorkers to be united in standing against hate.

The Council has consistently funded community-based hate crime prevention and response programs. Building on these efforts, I was proud to recently establish a Council Taskforce to Combat Hate.

The taskforce will engage New Yorkers across the city to develop policies and initiatives that make our communities safer for everyone by rooting out hate in all forms and uplifting our Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Black, Latino, and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Safety is our collective responsibility, and together, we can achieve it.

[PAUSE]

To move forward together as a city, we must protect essential services, create opportunity, and confront the challenges before us.

Central to this are our older adults.

Seniors are the jewels of our communities. They paved the path for us to be here today, and it's important we invest in their ability to age in place. They deserve to lead safe and independent lives, and remain in the neighborhoods they helped build. I love, admire, and treasure this valued, growing population – and I want to recognize our seniors from Rochdale Village and across the city who are here today.

The Council continues to prioritize food programs for our seniors, but the City must deepen its commitment. Providing resources for older adult centers, making public spaces more accessible, and advancing other holistic supports are key to our elders' well-being. These efforts must be increased and fortified.

To build a multi-generational society, one where all people can age with dignity, the City has a responsibility to support our seniors in the budget and throughout all of our policies.

[PAUSE]

New Yorkers have seen our city through it all and understand that our great city is not without its challenges.

But they do expect our government to effectively confront challenges with solutions that help us persevere.

As we have experienced firsthand, climate change is a serious issue that threatens our city. Neighborhoods are disproportionately impacted by its consequences, like flooding from extreme weather.

As climate disasters strike with increasing regularity, we must build up our green infrastructure and defenses, something the Council will push as we consider citywide zoning changes.

Our response to climate change must be equitable, because while none of us are immune to it, we are impacted differently.

Just like we have cooling centers during the summer, the Council will propose legislation requiring the City to create similar higher-ground centers during dangerous storms. These sites can keep New Yorkers safe, especially those living in basements during life-threatening floods.

While we can't predict the unexpected, we can be prepared and safeguard our communities.

[PAUSE]

New York City must be able to solve difficult challenges.

As humanitarian conditions worsened from economic, climate, and political conditions worldwide, global migration has surged.

Tens of thousands of people have made the dangerous and arduous journey, desperately seeking refuge in our city and across the country.

Each generation has figured out how to integrate immigrants and refugees with the help of government, and we have become a stronger nation because of it. In fact, our better-than-expected economic recovery from the pandemic has been attributed to this recent immigration.

However, this process has not been easy, and greater collaboration is needed to strengthen the City's response.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge our incredible city agency workers and community-based organizations who have been out on the frontlines.

Community organizations are our bellwethers, sounding the alarm on what's missing in our response and doing the work on-the-ground, often without funding and fueled by sheer grit, determination, and a commitment to do what's right.

We must support them with resources to do this essential work.

[PAUSE]

This new migration can benefit our city, but more intentional planning is needed.

I'm proud to announce the Council will launch a New Arrivals Strategy Team, led by veteran government and non-profit leaders, to focus on the strategies necessary to integrate new arrivals and support communities.

This group of thoughtful, committed civic leaders will recommend policies to stabilize new arrivals and identify lasting structural solutions that facilitate their path to self-sufficiency.

We've got to get this right, because we are a city and a nation of immigrants.

[PAUSE]

Over the past two years, we have realized my proposals to expand economic opportunities for New Yorkers through CUNY Reconnect, increase access to capital for MWBEs, provide vocational training to young people in public housing, and expand access to civil service careers.

Yet, our city government has not fully recovered from the pandemic, with vacancies leaving agencies understaffed. But we have the skilled labor to help our city rebuild. There are thousands of New Yorkers who are either looking to get ahead in their careers or are underemployed.

We must advance solutions to support them, and CUNY should be at the center of these efforts.

[PAUSE]

Our vision has been to fund CUNY programs that support expanded opportunity. This can only be realized if the City and State fully support this engine of economic mobility through their budgets.

We will leverage our CUNY programs and partner with DC37 on an initiative to create pathways to careers and jobs in our municipal workforce that strengthen our government.

This initiative will prioritize participants in CUNY programs to fill persistently vacant city job titles and provide students with the mobility and long-term security of a career in city government.

This program will also provide a track for seasonal jobs in agencies that help chronically underemployed New Yorkers, young people, and eligible asylum seekers gain opportunities to work and improve their employment prospects.

Our economic and job recovery has been uneven, and we must provide opportunities for people at every level to succeed.

[PAUSE]

The Council is full of good policy ideas that can provide important solutions to our city's challenges.

As a co-equal branch of government, our duty is to turn these ideas into effective laws and to conduct oversight.

But laws and policies are only as good as their implementation.

A prime example is the Streets Plan, which the Department of Transportation was required to create by law. DOT must comply and meet the benchmarks mandated by the plan. New Yorkers can wait no longer.

To help increase transparency, the Council will pursue legislation to require DOT to create a capital tracker of Streets Plan projects, from conception to finalized construction, that will be updated monthly. This will help all New Yorkers see the progress of specific activities attached to the plan.

Oversight and transparency are essential to accountability, which is critical to the health of our city and our democracy.

The Mayor's Management Reports provide important data about agencies, but we need the full picture.

The Council will begin conducting its own performance evaluations of city agencies, issuing report cards for individual agencies on their delivery of services to New Yorkers.

[PAUSE]

An effective and strong city government is a prerequisite to confronting our challenges, maintaining services, and delivering on our promise to New Yorkers.

It is how we move forward together.

Yet, years of understaffing and underinvestment have weakened critical agencies, leaving them unable to adequately support New Yorkers.

[PAUSE]

This impacts our city's non-profit organizations when government routinely fails to make contract payments on time.

Our human services workers are first responders, but for too long, they have lacked fair compensation for their valuable labor.

We've begun to correct this over the past two budgets, but we must continue building upon these commitments.

This workforce is essential and must be paid what they deserve.

[PAUSE]

City government must be effective for all New Yorkers, and especially for those who rely on us the most.

The troubling rise in poverty only reinforces what is at stake.

For years, the inefficiencies and under-investment in social services has harmed low-income New Yorkers. We continue to experience a rise in evictions, homelessness, and hunger among children and families.

The chronically delayed processing of cash and SNAP food assistance, which has left families hungry and our local economy without the federal dollars that they inject, represents a breakdown the City cannot afford.

We need to fix these problems for good and ensure our city agencies are equipped with the resources to effectively support New Yorkers in need.

New York City's budget is bigger than most countries – we have the resources to make government work for all people.

[PAUSE]

We must focus on execution and investment.

Our city agencies must be prepared to ensure families benefit from Summer EBT that will provide two hundred million dollars in additional federal food benefits to families starting this summer.

Better access to Fair Fares is needed to ensure it reaches New Yorkers who need support. It requires deeper investments, which is why we will continue to push for eligibility at 200 percent of the federal poverty level – so that more people can access our public transit system to unlock opportunity.

[PAUSE]

We must also remove barriers and simplify the process for families to access social services.

Take for instance the CityFHEPS rental voucher program.

It provides a pathway for people to exit shelters, and can also be a tool for prevention, helping families at risk of eviction remain in their homes instead of slipping into homelessness.

The Council passed our CityFHEPS reform laws to remove the eligibility barriers that block New Yorkers from accessing vouchers.

But the agency's longstanding cumbersome process to even get an apartment through the program remains an obstacle.

Look at the screen behind me - this is what someone in need must go through to access help.

It requires hours to navigate, and if you falter or make a mistake, you often have to start all over.

Most people who need help don't have the luxury of time to sink hours into this puzzle because of their work and family obligations.

As it stands, New Yorkers are playing a game that is rigged against them.

The Council will pursue changes to streamline this process and remove inefficiencies that prevent people from receiving the help they need.

[PAUSE]

To move our city forward, we've got to get back to basics.

Remove barriers to services.

Make government work for all people.

[PAUSE]

I want you to close your eyes and visualize something with me.

Imagine for a moment that you're living on your own as a teenager.

After the death of your partner, you're left to raise your one-year-old child alone.

With nowhere else to turn, you seek shelter. You're in luck, because a homeless shelter has room for you.

You eventually move into an apartment, but because you're stretched so thin, you miss a few rent payments and land in housing court.

At housing court, you get connected to the city's housing assistance program, which offers you a life-changing rental voucher.

It allows you to secure stable and permanent housing.

Life begins to open up even more, and you're able to attend college because you have housing and childcare.

After graduation, you get a full-time job, working to provide the kind of services that helped you become self-sufficient.

Now you have enough to take care of yourself, your kids, and your nieces and nephews too.
At every critical moment in your journey, you were able to access city services that helped provide stability.

[PAUSE]

While this may sound too good to be true – it's not.

This is the story of our Deputy Speaker, Diana Ayala. Stand up, Deputy Speaker Ayala!

[PAUSE]

At different points throughout our history, our city's services and programs have made it possible for New Yorkers to unlock opportunities.

Deputy Speaker Ayala achieved success, becoming the second-highest ranking member of the New York City Council.

Too many others' stories that start like hers today end very differently.

But the Deputy Speaker's story is proof that our government can deliver for New Yorkers.

We must insist what was possible for her then is possible for others today.

[PAUSE]

We've got to get back to basics and make government work for all New Yorkers.

[PAUSE]

We must support investments and prioritize the very people who make this city great and will sustain it.

Let's make sure New Yorkers can secure stable, affordable housing.

Let's make sure 3-K helps our working- and middle-class families remain and succeed in this city.

Let's open doors of opportunity for New Yorkers.

Now more than ever, let's move forward together to restore the promise of New York City – to all children, all families, and all the incredible New Yorkers who built this city.

Thank you!