



Testimony

Preliminary Budget Hearing - Criminal Justice  
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for

Committee on Criminal Justice

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New York, NY

Thank you, Chair Selvena N. Brooks-Powers, for holding this New York City Council Preliminary Budget and Oversight Hearing on the Executive Budget of the Department of Correction for Fiscal Year 2027. My name is Melanie Dominguez, I'm the organizing director at the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice, based in Brooklyn. Our members are from across the city, and include people who have been incarcerated, family members of currently and formerly incarcerated people, and more. Many of our members know exactly how horrific Rikers is and are deeply troubled that the closure plan is off track. This FY2027 budget proposal doesn't just fall short; it is a continuation of the status quo that persisted under the Adams administration. As a result, it leaves the Rikers closure plan in limbo and fails to address the rising jail population. While Mayor Mamdani continues to say he wants to close Rikers, those words fall short with this budget proposal. The city budget is where the rubber meets the road to save lives and close Rikers once and for all.

We submit this testimony to bring your attention to the crisis at Rikers and the need to shutter the notorious and deadly jail complex. Since the City Council passed the law to close Rikers Island in the fall of 2019, over 75 people have died in city jails. Violence at Rikers is out of control, and conditions at Rikers have long been horrific.<sup>i</sup> In 2015, a U.S. District Court appointed a federal monitor to regularly review and report on conditions there, and on progress, if any, for fixing the jails' problems.<sup>ii</sup> Conditions have gotten worse since then, and in January 2026, the federal court appointed Nicolas Delm as a remediation manager to address the decades of violence and dysfunction plaguing Rikers.<sup>iii</sup>

As the humanitarian crisis at Rikers continues, New Yorkers' tax dollars are being used to perpetuate this violence. According to the City's Comptroller Office, the cost of incarceration at Rikers is more than \$500,000 a person per year, which is *\$1,390 a day*.<sup>iv</sup> Incarcerating people in these inhumane conditions does not create safer communities, nor does it address survivors' needs. Investing in alternatives to incarceration has been proven to significantly reduce recidivism compared to jail and prison, and it also allows survivors to see the people who harm them held accountable and forge a pathway forward to create safer communities.<sup>v</sup>

Along with deteriorating conditions and mismanagement under Mayor Adams, the jail population increased by over 1,300 between 2022 and 2025. Today, there are more than 6,680 people incarcerated in city jails.<sup>vi</sup> Reducing the city's jail population was a central tenet of advancing the closure of Rikers, and this drastic increase highlights how the previous administration ignored and undermined the closure plan, which is now off track and significantly delayed.<sup>vii</sup>

The increased jail population has coincided with a ballooning sub-population in need of mental health treatment. Today, Rikers is the largest mental health facility in New York City and among the largest in the country. Roughly 60% of New Yorkers held at Rikers have needed mental health services, 22% are diagnosed with a serious mental illness, and 25% suffer from an opioid disorder.<sup>viii</sup> The conditions at Rikers are horrific and life-threatening for incarcerated people, and proper care isn't being delivered. Evidence and research have long shown that mental health programming in the community is dramatically cheaper and more effective than incarceration.

As the crisis at Rikers worsens, the jail population rises, and the closure plan remains off track, yet the FY2027 preliminary budget allocates \$2.99 billion to DOC, which represents a 5 percent increase for the agency budget compared with last June's adopted budget.<sup>ix</sup> The Vera Institute cites that the "DOC's budget increase is driven largely by personnel-related costs rather than investments like educational, therapeutic, and reentry programming, which receives just \$14 million annually."<sup>x</sup> If the mayor is truly committed to shutting Rikers, the city budget should *decrease* the DOC's budget and personnel costs to align with the closure plan and invest in proven solutions to safely reduce the jail population. Yet, this proposal does the exact opposite.

As the administration proposes increasing the bloated DOC budget, the Board of Corrections budget is once again underfunded at a time when oversight is critical. Additionally, this increased funding of the DOC means the mayor is not meeting his commitments to sustainable funding services that New Yorkers rely on: the mayor said he'd commit 0.05% of the city budget to libraries, but actually proposes *cutting* library budgets from the last year. The mayor said he'd commit 1% of the city budget to parks, but has failed to meet that commitment too.<sup>xi</sup> But here we are discussing *increases* to the DOC budget. This budget continues the status quo of increasing the budgets used to cage people while inadequately funding the programs and services proven to keep our communities safe and thriving without relying on incarceration.

Another key problem with this proposed budget is that it fails to investigate and address the increased costs to the Borough-Based Jails (BBJ), which have risen from the original estimate of \$8 billion when the closure law was enacted in 2019 to nearly \$16 billion today. The mayor and the city council have a moral and fiscal obligation to investigate why these costs are going up and what options might be available to reduce those costs, especially given that the timelines associated with these facilities (which now go well into the 2030's) are completely off-track and don't align with the mayor's stated position that he wants to follow the law to close Rikers by 2027.

This glaring disconnect is alarming, and unless it is quickly remedied, the status quo from the previous administration will persist. The mayor and city council can no longer

continue approving the DOC budget without more details on the BBJ's cost overruns and timelines. The city clearly has no intent on meeting the legal closure deadline of 2027, but neither has it reconfigured the plan to provide a definitive date of when Rikers *will* be closed. This reality, coupled with the jail population rising due to the city's limited effort, as reflected in this budget proposal, raises major concerns about the city's commitment to closing Rikers.

The city has other options available -- there are proven solutions to safely reduce the jail population and advance closure that the city can fund and implement in this year's budget. In November 2025, we issued a report with the Data Collaborative for Justice at John Jay titled, "[Rikers Island and Mental Health: Pathways Toward Community-Based Diversion and Jail Population Reduction](#)." To reduce the number of people incarcerated at Rikers with a mental health diagnosis and advance the closure plan, this report lays out a 15-point plan focused on advancing community-based diversion from Rikers through:

- City-Led Continuum of Expanded Diversion Options
- Alternatives for People at All Stages of Mental Competency Proceedings
- Greater Access to Mental Health Courts
- Effective Linkages from Courts and Jails to Community-Based Treatment
- Hospital-Based Secure Therapeutic Beds in Lieu of Rikers

[Research from the Vera Institute for Justice](#) aligns with the recommendations of our mental health report and calls on the mayor and city council to increase investments in the following programs:

- “11 million for eight more Intensive Mobile Treatment (IMT) teams and \$2 million for four more Forensic Assertive Community Treatment (FACT) teams, to scale up community-based mental health treatment and eliminate long waitlists for care
- \$20.3 million for 150 units of low-barrier housing, accompanied by a commitment to assess the need for transitional reentry housing and fund additional units accordingly;
- \$1.3 million for alternatives to incarceration (ATI) and \$3.3 million for reentry services to offset slated budget cuts, \$6.9 million to expand programs serving court-involved young people with mental health needs, and \$10 million in additional ATI funding to scale services up to meet demonstrated need;
- \$3 million in additional funding for the Board of Correction (BOC) to enable the agency to hire staff for rigorous jail oversight; and
- \$17.5 million in additional B-HEARD funding to make non-police mental health crisis response available 24 hours a day within its current operating boundaries

and include peer specialists, who would bring valuable expertise to response teams.”<sup>xii</sup>

These recommendations offer clear, proven solutions to safely reduce the jail population and ensure people receive the effective care they deserve.

### **To address this ongoing crisis at Rikers, we urge the NYC Council to pass an FY2027 budget that fulfills its commitment to shutting down Rikers.**

We urge this council to focus on three things: **first**, cut the budgets used for caging people – the DOC budget is bloated, wasteful, and must be cut. The city must also reduce the number of people incarcerated at Rikers by implementing the recommendations outlined above. **Second**, the closure of Rikers is not just a moral and legal imperative, but given the extraordinary savings that can be realized, it is also a *fiscal* imperative. The Council must pass a budget that advances efforts to shutter the notorious jail complex. **Third**, we must increase investments in things that produce real community safety: housing, healthcare, including mental health, education, and jobs. The city must also invest in responses to violence that are survivor-centered, accountability-based, safety-driven, and racially equitable.

The City Council must use its budgetary power to advance the closure of Rikers and hold the mayor accountable to the closure law. Lives are at stake.

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<sup>i</sup> Reuven Blau. “Assaults, Chaos and Deception: New Rikers Report Details Widespread Dysfunction.” *The City*. January 14, 2026 <https://www.thecity.nyc/2026/01/14/rikers-monitor-report-assaults-violence/>

<sup>ii</sup> Benjamin Weiser. “New York City Settles Suit Over Abuses at Rikers Island.” *The New York Times*. June 22, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/23/nyregion/new-york-city-settles-suit-over-abuses-at-rikers-island.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Hurubie Meko. “Judge Names Former C.I.A. Officer to Take Control of Rikers.” *The New York Times*. February 11, 2026 <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/27/nyregion/rikers-island-control-deml.html>

<sup>iv</sup> New York City Comptroller. “Ensuring Timely Trials.” July 16, 2024. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/ensuring-timely-trials/>

<sup>v</sup> Common Justice. “How and Why Many Survivors Benefit From Restorative Justice Alternatives to Incarceration.” January 21, 226. <https://commonjustice.org/resource/how-and-why-many-survivors-benefit-from-restorative-justice-alternatives-to-incarceration>

<sup>vi</sup> For the data, see Vera Institute for Justice. “New York Criminal Legal System Hub .” March 23, 2025. <https://www.vera.org/ny-data-hub/Jail>.

<sup>vii</sup> Independent Rikers Commission, “A Path Forward: The Blueprint to Close Rikers.” *A More Just NYC*. March 2025. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b6de4731aef1de914f43628/t/6802a228b5619e3f5bafd0cf/1745003055967/Independent+Rikers+Commission+Blueprint+to+Close+Rikers+Island+March+2025.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> John Jay College, Data Collaborative for Justice and the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice. *Rikers Island and Mental Health: Pathways Toward Community-Based Diversion and Jail Population Reduction*. November 2025 <https://katalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Rikers-Island-and-Mental-Health-Pathways-Toward-Community-Based-Diversion-and-Jail-Population-Reduction-11.19.25.pdf>

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<sup>ix</sup> Vera Institute for Justice, “A Look Inside the Fiscal Year 2027 New York City Department of Correction Budget.” March 2026. <https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/A-Look-Inside-the-FY-2027-New-York-City-Department-of-Correction-Budget.pdf?dm=1773851668>

<sup>x</sup> Vera Institute for Justice, “A Look Inside the Fiscal Year 2027 New York City Department of Correction Budget.” March 2026. <https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/A-Look-Inside-the-FY-2027-New-York-City-Department-of-Correction-Budget.pdf?dm=1773851668>

<sup>xi</sup> NYC Mayor Zohran Kwame Mamdani, “The Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget.” Financial Plan Summary. February 17, 2026. <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/feb26/sum2-26.pdf>

<sup>xii</sup> Vera Institute for Justice, “A Look Inside the Fiscal Year 2027 New York City Department of Correction Budget.” March 2026. <https://vera-institute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/publications/A-Look-Inside-the-FY-2027-New-York-City-Department-of-Correction-Budget.pdf?dm=1773851668>