



Testimony

Executive Budget Hearing – Joint Hearing Between the
Committee on Criminal Justice and the Committee on Finance

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for

Committee on Criminal Justice

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Thank you, Chair Selvena N. Brooks-Powers and Chair Linda Lee, for holding this joint New York City Council Executive Budget Hearing on the Department of Correction for Fiscal Year 2027. My name is Yonah Zeitz, I'm the advocacy 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 Executive Budget takes some steps in the right direction but ultimately falls short of making significant investments to reduce the jail population at Rikers. As a result, it leaves the Rikers closure plan in limbo and fails to reduce the jail population. While Mayor Mamdani continues to say he wants to close Rikers, those words fall short with this executive budget. Tinkering around the edges won't close Rikers; it will take decisive and large-scale action by the Mamdani administration. The city budget is where the rubber meets the road for saving lives and closing 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, nearly 80 people have died in city jails. Violence at Rikers is out of control, and conditions at Rikers have long been horrific.ⁱ Today, Rikers is also 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.ⁱⁱ

As the humanitarian crisis at Rikers continues, New Yorkers' tax dollars are being used to perpetuate this violence. According to the City's Comptroller's Office, the cost of incarceration at Rikers is more than \$500,000 a person per year, which is *\$1,390 a day*.ⁱⁱⁱ 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.^{iv}

As the crisis at Rikers worsens, the jail population rises, and the closure plan remains off track, yet the FY2027 executive budget allocates \$2.96 billion to DOC, which represents a 3.8% increase for the agency budget compared with last year's adopted budget.^v 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 receive just \$14 million annually."^{vi} We are glad to see the

Executive Budget reduce the uniformed headcount in the DOC by 586; however, there are still hundreds of vacancies, and the resources would be better spent on programming and decarceration efforts.^{vii} 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.

As the administration proposes increasing the bloated DOC budget, the Board of Corrections budget is being reduced 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 0.5% of the city budget to libraries and 1% to parks, both of which fall short in this budget.^{viii} 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 executive 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.

While this budget is an improvement over the previous administration's abysmal budgets, it doesn't convey the urgency of the crisis at hand. 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 to meet the legal closure deadline of 2027, but it has also not reconfigured the plan to provide a definitive date for when Rikers *will* be closed. This reality, coupled with the jail population currently at over 6,700 due to the city's limited efforts, raises major concerns about the city's commitment to closing Rikers.

The city has other options available—proven solutions to safely reduce the jail population and advance closure that the city can fund and implement in this year's budget. To reduce the jail population and advance closure, the mayor and city council must pass a budget that doesn't just restore funding from previous cuts, but significantly increases funding to ATI's, supervision release, re-entry services, Intensive Mobil Treatment (IMT) teams, Forensic Assertive Community Treatment (FACT) teams, B-HEARD crisis response, and low-barrier housing.

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.

ⁱ 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/>

ⁱⁱ 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>

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

^{iv} Common Justice. “How and Why Many Survivors Benefit From Restorative Justice Alternatives to Incarceration.” January 21, 2026. <https://commonjustice.org/resource/how-and-why-many-survivors-benefit-from-restorative-justice-alternatives-to-incarceration>

^v Zohran Kwame Mamdani, Mayor, “Expense Revenue Contract for The City of New York Executive Budget Fiscal Year 2027.” <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/exec26/erc5-26.pdf>

^{vi} 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>

^{vii} Vera Institute for Justice, “Vera Institute of Justice Applauds New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget.” May 12, 2026. <https://www.vera.org/newsroom/vera-institute-of-justice-applauds-new-york-city-mayor-zohran-mamdani-fiscal-year-2027-executive-budget>

^{viii} Chris Sommerfeldt and Joe Anuta, “With latest lifelines from Hochul, Mamdani balances NYC budget.” POLITICO. May 12, 2026. <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/05/12/hochul-mamdani-nyc-budget-00916257>