



Testimony

Oversight Hearing – Improving Court Operations to Reduce the
Jail Population

Yonah Zeitz, Advocacy Director

yonah@katalcenter.org

for

Committee on Criminal Justice

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Thank you, Chair Selvena N. Brooks-Powers, for holding this Committee on Criminal Justice Oversight Hearing on Improving Court Operations to Reduce the Jail Population. My name is Yonah Zeitz, and 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. Reducing the city's jail population is a critical component to advancing the closure of Rikers. This year's 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. Reducing the jail population will require decisive, large-scale action by the Mamdani administration, the New York City Council, and the courts.

We submit this testimony to bring your attention to the crisis at Rikers and the need to reduce the city's jail population and 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 Comptroller's Office, the cost of incarceration at Rikers is more than \$500,000 per person per year, or \$1,390 per *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, the FY2027 executive budget allocates \$2.96 billion to DOC, representing a 3.8% increase over last year's adopted budget.^v Additionally, during the campaign, Mamdani pledged to keep the NYPD officer headcount flat, yet the budget processes expanded the already enormous police force by adding 580 new officers. This increased funding for the DOC and the expansion of the NYPD means the mayor is not meeting his commitments to sustainable funding for services that New Yorkers rely on: for instance, 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.^{vi} Once again, New Yorkers are confronted with a budget

that increases funding for the DOC and prioritizes incarceration over the essential services the community relies on. This proposal continues the status quo of increasing the budgets used to arrest and cage people while inadequately funding the programs and services proven to reduce the jail population and allow New Yorkers to thrive.

The solutions to reduce the city's jail population and advance the closure of Rikers have been thoroughly documented in a host of detailed reports published by reputable sources over the last many years. These reports provide clear and actionable steps that the Mayor, City Council, and the courts can take to reduce the jail population at Rikers. The problem is a lack of political will by the mayor and the city council to actually implement these solutions. Let me offer a few examples.

In 2021, the Center for Court Innovation and A More Just NYC [released a report](#) titled "Closing Rikers Island: A Roadmap for Reducing the Jail in New York City." This report offers comprehensive solutions to reduce the city's jail population by reforming pretrial decisions to promote release, addressing case-processing delays, expanding non-carceral sentencing options, and investing in reentry services.^{vii} Most of these recommendations have yet to be effectively implemented and funded at scale.

In March 2024, the Data Collaboration for Justice at John Jay published a piece in Vital City titled "[A Jail Population of 3,700 or Lower is Achievable.](#)" In the piece, they directly address the outsized role judges and the courts must play in safely and significantly shrinking the city's jail population. The recommendations include the following:

- Adopt Proven Strategies to Shrink Case Processing Delays
- Require Pretrial Release After 180 Days
- Stop Setting Bail on First Arrests
- Embrace the Release Assessment
- Use Mandatory Programming for High-Need Cases
- End Unaffordable Bail
- Implement Automatic Early Bail Reviews
- Invest in Critical Tools
- Establish Targeted Supportive Housing and Mental Health Options
- Notify the Court of Chronic Medical or Mental Health Conditions
- Curb the Incarceration of Women, Gender-Expansive People, & People 55 & Over
- Reboot the Early Release Program

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^{viii}:

- City-Led Continuum of Expanded Diversion Options
- Alternatives for People at All Stages of Mental Competency Proceedings
- Greater Access to Mental Health Courts by Enacting the Treatment Court Expansion Act ([S4547](#) / [A4869](#)).
- Effective Linkages from Courts and Jails to Community-Based Treatment
- Hospital-Based Secure Therapeutic Beds in Lieu of Rikers

These recommendations offer clear, proven solutions to safely reduce the jail population and ensure people receive the effective care and support they deserve. If this mayoral administration and city council were truly committed to closing Rikers, these recommendations would be part of this year's budget.

The mayor and city council can no longer continue approving the DOC budget without more details on the borough-based jails' 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.

We urge this committee, and the full council, to hold up the city budgeting process until the administration puts forward a measurable, funded plan to shut down Rikers. The City Council must use its legislative and budgetary power to reduce the jail population, 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} 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>

vii A More Just NYC and the Center for Court Innovation. *“Closing Rikers Island: A Roadmap for Reducing Jail in New York City”*. July 2021.

https://www.innovatingjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Roadmap_for_Reducing_Jail_NYC_07192021_0.pdf

viii 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>