



Testimony of

Rachel Sznajderman
Corrections Specialist

New York County Defender Services

Budget and Oversight Hearing on The Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2025

March 8, 2024

My name is Rachel Sznajderman and I am a Corrections Specialist at New York County Defender Services (NYCDS). NYCDS is an indigent defense office that every year represents tens of thousands New Yorkers in Manhattan’s Criminal, Family, and Supreme Courts. The NYCDS Corrections Specialist Team provides a direct channel of communication with and advocacy for our clients who are incarcerated.

I. Introduction

Since Mayor Adams was elected to office more than two years ago, thirty people have been murdered on Rikers Island, under his watch. And yet, his proposed budget only seeks to further harm and isolate New York’s most vulnerable. Primarily through his proposed cuts to jail programming on the Island, reentry services for those returning home from Rikers, and the Board of Correction, Mayor Adams is attempting to take away the few remaining, life-saving resources for incarcerated people in New York. It is not hyperbole to state that should his proposed cuts be approved, we will see an uptick in the already exorbitant number of jail deaths. We urge the Council to reject Mayor Adams’ proposal, and instead advocate for a budget that will comply with the Borough-Based Jails Plan. Rikers Island will be shuttered in 2027, but only if we are successfully able to reduce the jail population by investing in New York’s most vulnerable communities.

II. Programming and Reentry Services

In the Spring of 2023, Mayor Adams cut \$17 million of DOC’s budget that essentially eliminated programming on Rikers Island. We have seen firsthand that any form of meaningful interaction or activity has been stripped from our clients, leaving them with truly nothing to do as they await their day in court. This has had a detrimental impact on our clients’ physical and

New York County Defender Services

100 William St, 20th Floor, New York, New York 10038 | t: 212.803.1500 | f: 212.571.6035 | nycds.org

mental well-being, creating more time for them to ruminate on the uncertainty of their cases, be subjected to horrific violence, or succumb to addiction in order to get through the day. The current disastrous situation sets people up for failure when they do return home. Now, in 2025, Mayor Adams hopes to further eliminate the few benefits incarcerated people are entitled to when they return home. The proposed cuts to the Office of Criminal Justice reentry initiatives will only decrease public safety, and increase the jail population because of the inevitable recidivism they will exacerbate. This is harmful to the people it directly impacts, such as our clients, and also the public at large. The resources available to formerly incarcerated people are already extremely limited, but they are life-saving to thousands of New Yorkers.

Furthermore, these cuts will inevitably increase the jail population, making it more difficult for the City to comply with the plan to close Rikers by 2027. No one with any knowledge of the New York City criminal legal system landscape would disagree that Rikers Island is a nightmare that must be left in the past. Mayor Adams' refusal to meaningfully prepare for this change is not only illegal, but antithetical to the best interests of New Yorkers.

III. Proposed Cuts to Jail Oversight Agency

Mayor Adams also seeks to cut funding to the Board of Correction, the sole agency providing oversight to the Department of Correction. These cuts would be extremely dangerous. In order for the Board of Correction to function, it must necessarily understand what is happening on the ground on Rikers Island. This allows them to address the problems facing incarcerated people directly, and provide essential reporting of the current conditions to the public. Board staff are already overwhelmed with the volume of complaints they receive from incarcerated people and advocates. Fewer Board staff members means fewer eyes on the Department of Correction, holding them accountable to their violations of constitutionally guaranteed rights. In order for the Board to comply with their charter and ensure that the Department is meeting its minimum standards, its funding must be maintained.

IV. Recommendations

Rather than seek to dismantle the few resources and avenues for support for currently and formerly incarcerated New Yorkers, the Council should cut Department of Correction funding for uniformed staff vacancies. No other jail system in the nation is as heavily staffed as Rikers Island. Even if these vacancies are eliminated, Rikers' staffing practices would still be abnormal and more than sufficient. Additionally, further costs could be eliminated by fully closing the Anna M. Kross Center and the Vernon C. Bain Center, which, given that they no longer house incarcerated people, should not be staffed. Furthermore, by continuing to lower the jail population in order to be in compliance with the plan to close Rikers, the money saved would vastly outweigh what Mayor Adams has proposed. If you have questions about this testimony, please email correctionsspecialists@nycds.org.