

Trinity Church Wall Street - Testimony - City Council Criminal Justice and Women/Gender Equity
April 27, 2021 | Subject: Oversight - Women's Experiences in City Jails

Good afternoon Chair Powers, Chair Diaz and members of the Committees on Criminal Justice and Women and Gender Equity. My name is Susan Shah and I am Managing Director for Racial Justice at Trinity Church Wall Street. Thank you for providing Trinity with the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

Trinity Church Wall Street is an active Episcopal church down the street for City Hall with more than 1,600 parishioners, who represent all five boroughs and form an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse congregation. In addition to our ministry, we have an established grants program that provides more than \$20 million in annual funding to partners to address racial justice by ending cycles of incarceration and homelessness. We are proud to support organizations like the Women's Community Justice Association, the Women's Prison Association, Providence House, Hour Children, Housing Plus Solutions, and Ladies of Hope Ministries--organizations that prove the potential for combining housing with reentry services for justice-involved women and families.

Last year, Trinity Church helped to form the Faith Communities for Just Reentry campaign, a coalition of over 40 faith leaders from across the City that seeks to address the urgent needs of justice-involved individuals leaving City jails amid COVID-19, as well as improve the City's support and services for New Yorkers reentering society following incarceration.

The Faith Communities for Just Reentry policy platform was informed by feedback and concerns we gathered from our partner advocacy organizations and service providers who work directly with justice-involved individuals reentering society. You will hear from some of our partners today on their experiences working with justice-involved women amid COVID-19. However, we wanted to spend a brief period of time discussing some of the overarching concerns that we have heard throughout the pandemic.

Prior to COVID-19, New York City's jail facilities for women, most notably the Rose M. Singer Center (Rosie's) on Rikers Island, were plagued with myriad issues that included chronically unsafe living

conditions, substandard medical services, and even instances of [abuse](#) from staff. The City's jail facilities have failed justice-involved women for years, [four in five](#) of whom are mothers and who enter the City's justice system with disproportionately higher rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and experiences of trauma.

With the onset of the pandemic, the City's jails, like prisons [across the country](#), have become hot spots for COVID-19 transmission, and threatening the health and wellbeing of justice-involved women. Over the course of this past year, numerous [stories have detailed](#) how Rosie's and other jails across the City have failed to provide sufficient PPE and testing, as well as enough sanitizing and [crowding prevention](#) measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. These issues have led to alarmingly higher rates of COVID-19 in carceral settings than the general public in New York City.

The City needs to do more to protect the health of incarcerated women in City jails and ensure that individuals being discharged from City jails are provided with the resources needed for their safety upon reentry through the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future.

To that end, Trinity recommends that the City implement the following measures and policies to protect the wellbeing of incarcerated women and others leaving City jails:

1. **Provide every individual with access to the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as COVID-19 testing upon discharge.** We commend the New York Supreme Court ruling that requires the State to provide access to the vaccine for incarcerated individuals and urge the City and State to move quickly to ensure timely access. The City also needs to guarantee COVID-19 testing as part of the discharge process to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 for those returning home to their families and communities.
2. **Issue IDNYC cards to individuals upon release from City jails.** Service providers have shared with us that many individuals are being released from Rikers without official government identification, which causes significant problems in accessing housing, employment, public benefits, and other services that are critical to ensuring stability when readjusting to life after incarceration.
3. **Ensure that individuals released from City jails have immediate access to Medicaid coverage upon discharge.** Reentry service providers have also noted that many of their clients are released from jail without their Medicaid properly activated. Given that the majority of women serving time in City jails have mental health or substance abuse issues, this gap in coverage creates significant issues in accessing needed medications and healthcare in a timely manner and is only compounded by the threat of contracting COVID-19.

4. **Ban housing discrimination on the basis of arrest or criminal record in New York City, and increase the value of City-financed housing vouchers.** Four in five justice-involved women are primary caretakers of children, but many cannot reunite with them because they cannot secure safe, stable, and affordable housing. The City Council has two pending pieces of legislation that can change this. Intro 146 increases the value of CityFHEPS vouchers to fair market value and already has a supermajority of council members signed on as sponsors. Intro 2047, the Fair Chance for Housing bill, would make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against these mothers and other justice-involved New Yorkers. We ask that the City Council urgently pass both Intro 146 and Intro 2047.
5. **Develop a coordinated reentry system in New York City to guarantee the safety and success of justice-involved individuals when they return from jail.** The City does not currently have an agency or department that coordinates all of the City's reentry services for individuals leaving City jails, which are currently overseen by multiple City agencies. We believe that the Mayor and City Council should work together to develop a high-level office to provide coordinated and comprehensive reentry services and work intersectionality to address the unique needs of certain groups, such as incarcerated women.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to take any questions.