

TRINITY CHURCH WALL STREET

3.8.24 - Trinity Church Testimony - Criminal Justice Committee - FY25 Preliminary Budget Hearing

Dear Chair Nurse and Members of the Committee on Criminal Justice:

My name is Natasha Lifton, Managing Director of External Affairs and Special Projects at Trinity Church Wall Street. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for this Fiscal Year 2025 preliminary budget hearing. We urge the Mayor and City Council to prioritize investments in services for justice-involved New Yorkers to divert them from incarceration and support their re-entry into society.

Trinity Church Wall Street is an Episcopal Church in Lower Manhattan with a congregation of more than 1,600 parishioners, who come from all five boroughs and form an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse congregation. In addition to our ministry, we carry out the mission of faith and social justice through direct services, grantmaking, and advocacy.

Trinity has a long history of advancing social justice in alignment with our belief that every person is created in the image of God and has dignity and value. Trinity focuses on strengthening the well-being of young people, families, and our community, particularly as our city strives for an equitable recovery, recognizing that those hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout are Black and brown New Yorkers.

In this context and as faith leaders and fellow New Yorkers, we continue to be deeply troubled by the appalling conditions throughout New York City's jails and the negative impact that they have on those detained and working in them. These unacceptable results occur despite expenditures of more than \$550,000 a year to incarcerate one person, resulting in the most expensive jail system in the country.

This crisis requires our elected leaders to transform New York City's justice system into one that recognizes the humanity and dignity of all individuals and improves public safety. We are therefore deeply concerned that the Mayor's preliminary budget proposes cuts to alternatives to incarceration, supervised release, and re-entry and does not make the investments necessary in housing and mental health care. It also does not take the necessary steps to right-size the Department of Correction (DOC)'s budget through measures such as reducing the number of corrections officers and overtime costs, holding staff accountable for chronic absenteeism, and closing empty jails such as the Anna M. Kross Center. In addition, we urge the following:

- 1. Protect full funding for and stick to the mandated timeframe of the plan to close Rikers Island by 2027 and build smaller and more humane borough-based jails.** We urge the Mayor and the City Council to enact and financially support the recommendations made by the [Commission on Community Reinvestment](#) and the Closure of Rikers Island, established by Local Law 19334, and ensure that funding for the Commission is baselined into the City budget until Rikers is fully closed. club

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We also call on the Mayor to prioritize policy and practice reforms that will safely reduce the jail population, including but not limited to the investments noted below, and facilitate prompt construction of the four borough-based jails.

- 2. Restore \$27.8M to the Office of Criminal Justice** for alternatives to incarceration (ATIs), supervised release and re-entry programs including \$6.7M for ATIs, \$13.1M for supervised release, and \$8M for re-entry services to enable the city to sufficiently reduce the jail population on Rikers Island. Opportunities to reduce recidivism and divert people from Rikers should be fully utilized, in collaboration with the Jail Population Review Initiative that the Council established last year through Local Law 75-2023.
- 3. Reinstate in-custody programming provided by trusted community providers.** Last year, the DOC abruptly informed six community-based organizations that collectively were serving around 1,700 people a day across Rikers facilities that their contracts were being terminated. As anticipated, the DOC is struggling to provide the same level of services as these culturally competent providers with decades of experience. Eliminating these programs inside the jails also broke the continuum of care these same organizations provide once people are released. This continuum is critical to individual successful reentry and our collective public safety.
- 4. Allocate additional funding to expand housing and services for those struggling with mental health challenges and/or criminal legal system involvement.**
In the Points of Agreement on Closing Rikers, the administration agreed to establish 380 more units of Justice Involved Supportive Housing (JISH), a model which has been shown to reduce jail, shelter, and hospital stays, and generating substantial cost savings. But JISH funding rates put forth by the city were so low that qualified providers have not applied, and operators of the existing 120 units are struggling to keep them open. We therefore call on the administration to establish a separate line-item for JISH in the budget and increase funding rates to support the immediate establishment of new units and to stabilize the existing ones.

The Close Rikers Plan also promised “A new community-based mental health safety net.” To help achieve this goal, an additional \$2.9M should be allocated to enable 5 of the 22 newly funded Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams to operate as Forensic Assertive Community Treatment (FACT) teams. ACT is an evidenced-based practice that offers treatment, rehabilitation, and community integration services to individuals diagnosed with serious mental illness using a person-centered, recovery-based approach to care. Additional funding would enable these teams to utilize FACT, an updated version of ACT which provides coordinated behavioral health and social support services to people with recent justice-involvement who have a history of serious dysfunction and high usage of mental health emergency services. FACT staff include experts in

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psychiatry, mental health, nursing, social work, substance use treatment, peer support, housing, employment, family, and criminal justice.

Lastly, \$6M should be added to ensure full implementation of Local Law 118-2023, which mandates the establishment of four new crisis respite centers to provide immediate shelter and services to those experiencing a mental health emergency, as well as \$6M more to fully implement Local Law 119-2023, supporting the establishment of five new clubhouses. The clubhouse model, pioneered by Fountain House in the 1940s, creates an intentional community where members and staff work together to carry out all daily operations. Members have access to crisis intervention services and are connected with resources to support their basic needs, including employment, education, housing, and food.

Thank you for providing Trinity with the opportunity to submit testimony.