

TRINITY CHURCH WALL STREET

03.20.24 - Trinity Church Testimony - Public Safety Committee - FY25 Preliminary Budget

To Chair Salaam and Members of the Public Safety Committee:

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. Below, I provide recommendations for the investments we believe should be included in this year's budget to make New York City safer and more just for all.

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 concerned about the ongoing crisis in the City's jails, coupled with the recent increase in total jail population. According to the City Comptroller's [DOC Dashboard](#), the jail population has steadily increased and stands at 6,167 individuals as of February 1. 2022 had the highest rate of death since 2000, and so far this year, 2 individuals have tragically died while incarcerated in city jails. Further, the average number of incarcerated individuals with a mental illness continues to climb with [more than 50% of people currently detained on Rikers island having a mental health diagnosis](#), as well as hundreds of people languishing on Rikers every day simply because they are homeless.

To address these challenges while making the city safer, elected leaders need to support solutions that reduce the need for incarceration, prevent individuals in crisis from interacting with the criminal justice system in the first place, and lower the rate of recidivism. To achieve these goals, we urge the Mayor and City Council to commit to 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 193, and

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ensure that funding for the Commission is baselined in the budget until Rikers is fully closed. 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. **Expand and enhance mental health services, particularly for those in crisis, to reduce unnecessary interactions with law enforcement and the justice system.** Specifically, the Mayor and the Council should:
 - a. Reject a reduction of \$11.7M over two years for the Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division (B-HEARD) program. Instead, the initiative should be expanded citywide to respond to more mental health-related crises. And, modeling best practices, B-HEARD should be staffed by teams that include peers, along with mental health clinicians and emergency medical technicians.
 - b. Allocate \$6M to ensure the 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.
4. **Invest in youth services, housing, job training and placement assistance, and other services that support New Yorkers in their communities and prevent unnecessary incarceration** as follows:
 - a. Reject the approximately \$350M reduction to the budget of the Department of Youth and Community Development, including funding for mediation, afterschool programs, gun violence prevention and interruption programs, the Summer Youth Employment Program, and the Precision Employment Initiative, a jobs training program that targets neighborhoods with high rates of gun violence.

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- b. 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 generate 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 allocate \$6.4M to create new units and establish a separate line-item for JISH in the budget stabilize the existing ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.