

New York City Department of Correction Feasibility Study on Weekend Tele-Visits

Executive Summary

The New York City Department of Correction (“DOC” or “the Department”) completed a study related to the feasibility of operating tele-visits for family visitation on weekend days, to fulfill its obligations under § 9-168(d), as added by Local Law 40 of 2025. Several challenges exist as it relates to operating weekend tele-visits due to the layout of the existing jail facilities on Rikers Island, as well as limited availability of uniformed staff to support additional duties during weekend visitation hours, which would prevent the Department from offering tele-visits on weekends without significant disruptions to in-person visitation operations required by NYC Board of Correction Minimum Standards. However, the Department does support the expansion of tele-visits and offers a technological solution via the new online scheduling system that is in development, as required by New York City Admin Code § 9-170. By utilizing this scheduling system, visitors would be offered a choice between a scheduled in-person visit or tele-visit for each available time slot. DOC believes that implementing the scheduling system will streamline all visit related services and operations, allowing the agency to efficiently deploy staff and manage the demand for either in-person or tele-visits simultaneously.

Introduction

Visits with friends and family play a central role in the preservation of bonds between people in the Department’s care and their communities. Additionally, visitation services are linked with a reduction in both recidivism rates as well as violence in jails. Research indicates that people in custody who receive visits are 26% less prone to recidivate (Mitchell, 2016) and 25% less likely to be involved in “major, violent and injurious acts of misconduct.” (Reidy & Sorensen, 2020).

The Department began offering tele-visits in 2018, and expanded tele-visiting significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic to afford people in DOC’s care the chance to remain connected to their loved ones during an unprecedented time, as all in-person visits were suspended. Tele-visits have continued to prove popular in the years following the pandemic and the Department has continued to provide them as part of the regular visits calendar every Friday, in recognition that they strengthen family bonds and community ties.

The Department recognizes the importance of connecting people in its care with their support network through visits and has worked diligently to improve the overall visit experience. The Department has been modeling the process flow for visitation with the goal of minimizing wait times and for improving service delivery of the free visitor shuttle bus. These ongoing efforts have led to the appointment of a non-uniformed manager to serve as the Department’s first Executive Director of Visit Operations, as well as the creation of various data driven tools to monitor the live island-wide operation, address those delays in real time. The Department’s efforts further include the creation of child-friendly visiting spaces in collaboration with the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, a partnership that was recently expanded to include the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, to provide individuals in DOC’s care an opportunity to visit with their children outside of the jails.

After several years of running tele-visits, the Department has a clear understanding of the benefits of offering them in conjunction with in-person visits. However, from an operational perspective,

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regularly offering both visit types concurrently on weekend days presents significant challenges at this time.

Current Operations

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has experienced a decrease in staffing levels for uniformed personnel, while the average daily population of people in DOC's care has increased. The Department remains optimistic that hiring the first-ever Executive Director of Visit Operations, as well as adding more non-uniformed staff to the visit process, will help to manage the flow of visitors and improve their overall experience. However, this alone will not be sufficient to streamline the process, which is why the Department began developing an online visit scheduling system. Demand for visits can vary widely from one day to the next, which presents several logistical challenges in planning for and optimizing visit operations. By utilizing a scheduling system DOC can better anticipate, coordinate, and manage the flow of visitors, and ensure a more consistent experience for visitors hour by hour and day to day. Similarly, if DOC uses this scheduling system to offer visitors the option of either an in-person visit or a tele-visit, and reserve the slots holistically between both options, the uniformed staff involved in the visit operation can be utilized in a more efficient manner.

To ensure that visits are safe and secure, in-person visitors must pass through multiple layers of security screening prior to visiting a loved one, including but not limited to L3 non-ionizing body scanners, magnetometers, K-9 screening, in addition to a security presence both in-person on the visit floor and observations via live video monitoring. Uniformed staff conduct searches of both visitors and people in DOC's care, transport visitors around Rikers Island, escort individuals to and from the visit floor, and observe and oversee the visits as they take place. In the case there is an incident on the visit floor, or at any other point during the visit process, uniformed staff intervene and may arrest visitors in relation to certain incidents.

Analysis: Visits Staffing

Given the constraints on current staffing levels and facility layouts, the Department analyzed the historic demand of visits and the staffing allocation during weekend days to assess if there is additional capacity to offer tele-visits without affecting the in-person visits on the island under the existing visit framework.

Currently, the Department offers in-person visits on weekends and visitors can register for a visit at the Central Visits building between 7am-12pm. In practice visit operations run far past registration hours and must be staffed until the last visitor leaves each given facility. On average, the last visitor departs Rikers Island from the Central Visits building at 8:12pm. In 2024-2025, the time taken to fulfill demand of in-person visits was over 10 hours for 98.5% of the weekend days. The long operational hours are mainly related to three challenges. First, as mentioned in the previous section, there are extensive security measures throughout the operation to ensure the safety of the public, people in DOC's care, and staff and providers. This is necessary to prevent contraband from entering the facilities. Staff also need to screen people in DOC's care against other people in DOC's care who may be on the visit floor simultaneously to minimize the risk of violence during

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visits. Two people with a violent history and an active separation order cannot come together, especially with members of the public, which may include small children, in close proximity. There can also be reasonable delays for facilities to receive visits, as staff need to ensure other operations are in place while visits are ongoing. Second, all in-person visits are currently unscheduled walk-ins, and the demand is stochastic (see Figure 1). It is difficult to adjust the staffing level fluidly based on the demand, or to prepare in advance for various types of visits, especially for a large group of family visits or a visit to a high-risk individual when all these visits are currently unscheduled walk-ins. Third, Rikers Island has one of the largest physical footprints of a correctional system in the United States, sitting on over 400 acres of land, and so requires the use of the buses to move people around the island securely. This adds an additional layer of both staffing to operate those buses, as well as subsequent delays.

Figure 1a

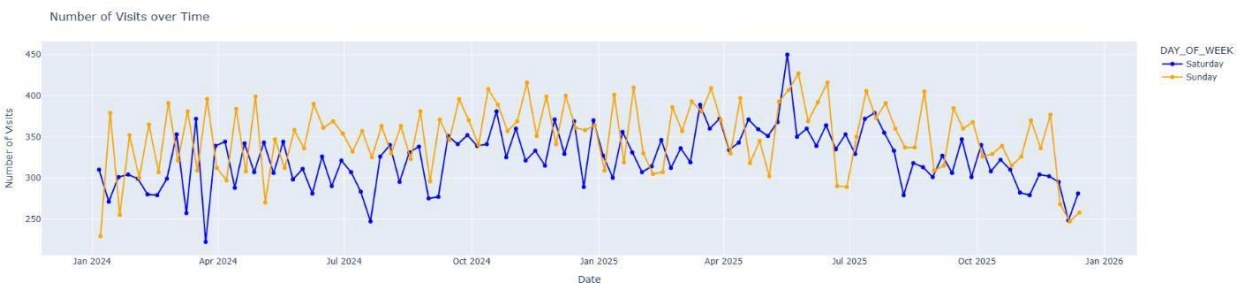


Figure 1b

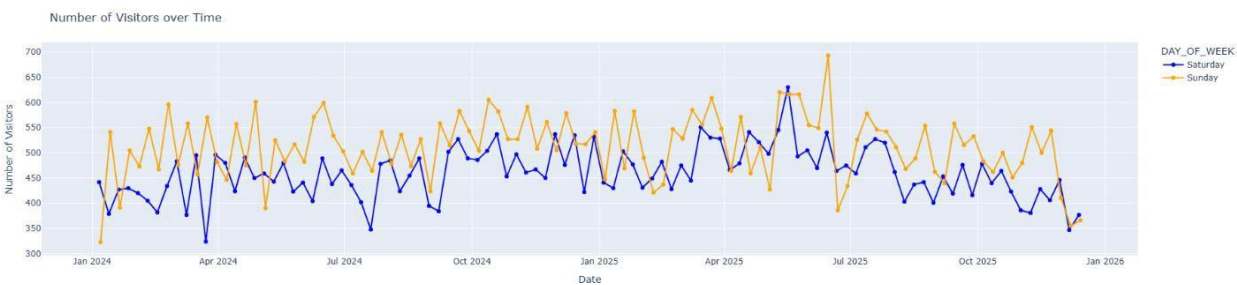


Figure 1. Total number of visits (Figure 1a) and total number of visitors (Figure 1b) on Saturdays (in blue) and on Sunday (in orange) in 2024-2025. Data is as of December 15, 2025. Number of visit processed on weekends varies from 200 to 450, and the number of visitors on weekends varies from 300 to 700.

Proper staffing is the key to conducting visits efficiently, as uniformed staff are required at each stage of the visit process, including security screening, transportation, escort, and supervision on the visit floor. Despite the continued decrease in uniformed staff over the past years, the

Department has strived to maintain stable staffing levels for visit posts and significantly increased the number of uniformed staff scheduled for visits posts since April 2025 (see Figure 2). However, on weekend days when the demand is high, operational hours are often extended. On these days,

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visitors wait longer before their visits when there are more visits registered in a day. This is because more visits may happen simultaneously and at any given time staff need to perform security checks on more visitors or screen more people in DOC's care. On these days, visitors experience longer wait times due to increased visit volume and the cumulative impact on processing over the course of the day, as higher demand requires staff to conduct more visits simultaneously as well as more security screenings, which slows processing for later-arriving visitors. Consistent with this trend, in 2024-2025, on a weekend day, the last 25% of visits took 24 minutes longer than the first 25% of visits.



Figure 2. *Percentage of uniformed staff scheduled for posts related to the visit operation across Rikers Island on weekend days. Data is from the first weekend of January 2024 to the second weekend of December 2025.*

It is within this context that DOC focused on the question of whether there is additional staffing capacity for tele-visits on weekends. On the demand side, a safe estimate of staff hours¹ needed for one in-person visit on weekends is 2.6 hours. Meeting an average of 340 in-person visits² on a

¹ One staff hour is one hour's work for a uniformed staff. The number of staff hours for an in-person visit is estimated by the total number of staff hours (scheduled hours) on a weekend day divided by the total number of registrations on the same day. We recognize that there are "easy" days and "difficult" days: on "difficult" days, there could be more visitors, high-risk people in DOC's care involved and/or issues with other operations to deal with in facilities. Hence, more staff hours are needed per visit on "difficult" days. On "easy" days, fewer staff hours are needed per visit. Here we picked the 75% quantile as the estimated staff hours needed for one in-person visit, as historically the number of staff hours per visit is no more than this value for 75% of the time during 2024-2025. It provides a safe buffer for planning purpose, given the current process and staffing level.

² The average number of visits on weekends in 2025. Data is as of December 15, 2025.

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weekend day, therefore requires 898.6 staff hours³ in total. On the supply side, the average of total staff hours the Department can deploy on a weekend day from 6am to 8pm is 837.5 staff hours. This is barely sufficient to fulfill the average number of in-person visits before 8pm. If tele-visits were to be added on weekends, a certain amount of staffing would need to be spared for tele-visits, which would likely delay the in-person visit process and reduce the number of in-person visits fulfilled in a day. In conclusion, under the current operational framework, DOC does not have the additional staffing capacity needed to offer tele-visits on weekends without adding significant delays to in-person visits. The solution is to change the operational framework by utilizing the online scheduling system currently under development, which is discussed in more detail below.

Discussion: Future Operations Under the Borough-Based Jail Plan

With the development of the Borough-Based Jail (“BBJ”) plan, the new facilities will offer a different layout with a key goal of increasing staffing efficiency. Since tele-visits currently share the same visit area with in-person visits in the existing facilities on Rikers Island, it takes time and staffing to screen and escort individuals from their housing areas to the visit floor. In the proposed layout for each BBJ, there will be video tele-conferencing booths that support tele-visits on every floor, which will be in closer proximity to housing areas and hence significantly reduce the time needed for staff to escort people.

It has proven challenging and costly to reproduce these advantages at the current facilities on Rikers Island. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department experimented with installing tele visit booths in certain celled housing areas, whereby one cell would be repurposed into a visit room. However, due to the variation in floor plans across the Department’s portfolio of facilities, this solution proved infeasible for dorm housing areas. Dorm housing areas did not provide adequate privacy or security features, such that other individuals in the unit could see or hear the visits taking place. Some of these concerns could be addressed. However, the housing areas that had this tele-visit equipment installed previously have since had it removed due to an increase in population and subsequent need for bedspace. Reverting and expanding on this approach would require capital expenditure and would decrease the bed capacity of several facilities.

Recommendation: Utilize the New Scheduling System

The Department has been actively developing a new scheduling system for in-person visits. This technology should be leveraged to explore the feasibility of affording weekend tele-visits in conjunction with in-person visits without reducing the number of visiting hours. This new platform will greatly aid the agency’s ability to manage the flow of visitors on a day-to-day basis.

If the Department integrates in-person visits and tele-visits in the same system and allows visitors the choice of an in-person visit or a tele-visit for a given timeslot, then the demand on the

³ The average number of staff hours from 6am to 8pm on a weekend day in 2025. Data is as of December 15, 2025.

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uniformed staff responsible for escorting individuals to the visit floor will remain fixed. Further, depending on the number of tele-visit slots that are booked for a given hour relative to the number of in-person slots at a given facility, the security demands on staff responsible for screening in-person visitors may be reduced, thereby allowing faster processing times for in-person visits without the need for additional uniformed staff.

The Department recommends piloting in-person and tele-visit scheduling across weekends in an identified facility once the online scheduling system is live. This solution would enable a wider array of options for those interested in visiting their loved ones. Upon completion of the pilot, a proper evaluation would be conducted to ensure that the operational improvements are in-line with

expectations. Provided the evaluation proves the viability of the concept, the Department would then implement joint scheduling at the remaining facilities.

References

Mitchell, M. M. (2016, December). The effect of prison visitation on reentry success: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, pp. 74-83.

Reidy, T., & Sorensen, J. (2020, July 8). Visitation and Misconduct Among Maximum-Security Inmates. *The Prison Journal*.