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Statement before the
New York City Council
Committee on Government Operations
Committee on Criminal Justice

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Good Afternoon, Chair Cabrera, Chair Powers, and members of the Committee on Government Operations and the Committee on Criminal Justice. My name is Michael Tausek. I am the Deputy Commissioner of Adult Programming and Community Partnerships at the Department of Correction (DOC). I am here today to speak about the Department's ongoing efforts to ensure that individuals in our custody are aware of their voting rights and have every opportunity to do so, even if they are in custody. Since the Department last testified before the Council on this topic in 2015, we have continued to expand our efforts to encourage voting.

As we stated in 2015, DOC strongly advocates for everyone in our custody to be educated on their right to vote and be given every opportunity to register and/or vote. This commitment has not wavered. The Department continues to provide voter registration materials to those in custody throughout the year, with efforts increased leading up to elections. Posters are displayed throughout facilities and applications are made available in common areas. The Inmate Handbook, which everyone receives upon admission to custody, includes information about voter registration and the absentee ballot process.

For several years, DOC has conducted voter rights awareness events with partner organizations, but our efforts have been increased this year. In August, DOC Program Counselors, along with the Legal Aid Society, NYCLU, and interested volunteers from the community, began holding voter registrations and mail-in ballot outreaches. The Department has posted over 1,000 voter outreach posters containing voter registration eligibility requirements in both English and Spanish in high-traffic areas, such as the Law Libraries, Intakes, and Program Areas in all facilities. Staff and volunteers go to individual housing units to register people to vote. In coordination with the Mayor's Public Engagement Unit, DOC also began voter registration and outreach for visitors at Central Visits in August.

DOC staff have received critical training to ensure that the best services are provided. More than two dozen Law Library Coordinators received a two-hour voter registration and outreach training, which

was provided in coordination with the Mayor's Public Engagement Unit. Program counselors who work in certain specialized housing units received a similar one-hour training. Additional program counselors will receive voter registration training, provided in coordination with the NYC Campaign Finance Board, next week.

Perhaps most importantly, DOC has created a secondary mail channel for the collection and distribution of all election mail, outside of the correspondence system, in order to prioritize voter registration and mail-in ballot mail. This secondary channel, coordinated with the Board of Elections and DOC Programs, allows election mail to bypass security processes and removes the possibility of staff opening others' election mail for inspection. This method also allows for the collection and delivery of election mail up to the BOE in-person deadline. We began a practice of delivering last-minute mail by hand to the BOE offices across the boroughs.

In years past, DOC has presented at the NYC Campaign Finance Board's annual training, on raising voting rights awareness. DOC was selected to present because of our effective efforts to raise awareness about voting within our facilities. The expanded efforts we have implemented this year build on this tradition.

Intro. 514, which is being considered by the committees today, would require an additional point of information distribution, as it requires that voting information be provided to everyone upon release from custody. We can certainly provide information again upon discharge, though we would like to clarify some of the text in the bill.

I appreciate the Council's focus on this critically important area, and I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions that you have.