



Freedom
Agenda

Testimony to Commission on Community Reinvestment and Closing Rikers

November 18, 2025

My name is Sarita Daftary and I am a co-director of Freedom Agenda, one of the organizations leading the Campaign to Close Rikers.

Our members have been incarcerated at Rikers, or had loved ones incarcerated there. Overwhelming, they are also people who have for decades watched the basic needs of their communities go unmet, while billions are spent each year to incarcerate their family and neighbors. Between 1979 and 1980, incarcerated men at Green Haven Correctional Facility conducted research that came to be known as the Seven Neighborhood Study. It revealed that over 75 percent of New York State's prison population came from seven New York City neighborhoods (the South Bronx, Harlem, Lower East Side, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York, South Jamaica). That reality remains largely the same today. The cumulative effect of this has been devastating, and this Commission was established to finally begin to repair the decades of harm done by mass incarceration and community disinvestment.

We have convened multiple conversations with residents in communities with the highest rates of admission to Rikers, and have so far submitted testimony capturing ideas shared with us in five community forums held between August 2024 and November 2025 in South Jamaica, Harlem, the South Bronx, Central Brooklyn, and Far Rockaway in which we asked residents "How do you want to see the money that has been used for Rikers & mass incarceration reinvested in your community?"

We've continued these forums, in collaboration with community-based organizations. Below, we've included a summary of the ideas shared with us, either through verbal or written responses.

The work of this Commission is important, and we're glad these public hearings are happening. **We again urge you to also hold in-person meetings in impacted communities, coupled with robust outreach, to best meet this historic opportunity to reinvest in the communities that Rikers has torn apart.**

Thank you,

Sarita Daftary

Co-Director, Freedom Agenda

Sdaftary@urbanjustice.org

Brownsville, November 2025

Transcription of verbal responses from 13 people

- Well-rounded programs for everyone in jail to meet them where they're at, more investment in real rehabilitation
- More investment in mental health
- Education, including social emotional, how to channel their emotions
- Therapy, street therapy, a lot of people need to talk to somebody
- Fix potholes
- Help the homeless and get people off the streets
- Get people fed
- Jobs for people coming home from jail – standing right there when people get out to see what they need
- Recreation centers for afterschool (*recommended 3 times*)
- Programs with consistency
- Open up an agency that helps out the community, provide connections for people to help other community members out and encourage people to treat neighbors like neighbors not strangers
- Education to help young people pursue their goals
- Programs to address poverty
- More deeply affordable housing
- Better job opportunities, programs to learn new skills (*recommended by 2 people*)
- Fix up and maintaining NYCHA housing (*recommended by 3 people*)

Testimony of Vidal Guzman

Executive Director, America On Trial Inc.

Virtual Public Hearing



Testimony for the Commission on Community Reinvestment and the Closure of Rikers Island

My name is Vidal Guzman, and I'm the Executive Director of America On Trial Inc. — a grassroots movement grounded in lived experience and dedicated to building a future of community-led liberation.

I speak to you not just as a nonprofit leader, but as someone who grew up in Harlem — and who was incarcerated on Rikers Island at 16, and again at 19. I know the trauma of that place not through headlines, but through experience. I've walked its hallways. I've felt what it means to be discarded by a system that criminalizes poverty and punishes youth instead of protecting them.

*If we truly want to close Rikers — not just the buildings, but the cycle that feeds it — we must invest in programs that build power, not jails. That means investing in education that teaches voting, civic engagement, and democracy. When young people and **formerly incarcerated individuals** understand how the government works, they gain the tools to change it.*

As Aristotle once said, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." The Greeks believed that when citizens are educated, they are empowered — and that education creates a stronger democracy. The same truth applies today: when we teach our youth to use their voices, we strengthen our communities and weaken the pipeline to incarceration.

We can also learn from other countries that treat civic education as essential to democracy — not optional.

- *In Germany, "Civic Education" (Politische Bildung) is required nationwide, teaching students about democracy, voting, and human rights.*

- *In Finland, civic education emphasizes understanding government, fact-checking information, and participating in society.*
- *In Canada, schools teach about elections and even hold mock votes so students experience the power of participation early.*

These countries understand that democracy is strongest when people are educated, informed, and engaged — and that's the kind of investment we need here in nyc.

*I believe we need to invest in **special initiatives** like youth training in civic education, leadership, and voting — as well as programs that engage **formerly incarcerated individuals** in civic life. These programs can help lower incarceration rates. When people know their power — when they see themselves as part of shaping the system — they're less likely to be trapped by it.*

Closing Rikers must not be a symbol. It must be a commitment — to fund bold, grassroots solutions led by those who've lived the harm and are building the way forward. When we invest in people, not punishment, we don't just close jails — we open doors to democracy.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Vidal Guzman