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From: Rikers Public Memory Project <rikersmemory@create-forward.com>
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To: Reinvestment
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Written testimony for May 30th hearing

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To the Commission on Community Reinvestment and the Closure of Rikers Island,

The Rikers Public Memory Project (RPMP) collects and makes visible the stories of people most impacted by Rikers Island, to mobilize action toward repairing its generational harms and interrupting the dehumanizing narratives about people harmed by Rikers. Our vision is a New York City and society that has chosen a culture of care over punishment.

One way that we document the legacy of Rikers is through our Oral History program, which invites directly-impacted people to contribute their Rikers story to a community archive assembled from similar experiences. [The Oral History collection is accessible through our digital archive](#), but for the upcoming hearing on May 30th, 2025, we want to amplify the words from one of our contributors.

Brandon Holmes participated in a [group interview](#) with RPMP, the Local Voices Network, and Department for Health and Mental Hygiene on June 24th, 2020. Brandon's grandparents met in and came from Harlem in the 1950-60s. His uncle is a recently retired MTA Steward from Cambria Heights in Queens since the 1980s. Brandon and his aunt lived in Bed-Stuy for 25 years.

When it comes to investing in justice-impacted communities and neighborhoods, Brandon had the following to say...

Brandon Holmes:

I'd say, yeah, the major thing that always sticks out to me is, my member here in Bed-Stuy, Alicka Ampry-Samuels, she had actually voted against the borough-based-plan, even though we have one of the juvenile detention facilities in our neighborhood too. It was because she felt like the plan, it cost too much money. I think the biggest thing for me is, yeah, this whole period of transformation and revolution is going to cost money because we have to recognize that nobody is disposable. And the fact that we're sinking billions of dollars every year into punitive agencies, but shy away from spending money to improve the conditions of confinement, or improve the accesses to resources, or family and loved ones for people that are incarcerated.

No one would ever bat an eyelash if we spend six billion on a college campus, right? But when we're talking about building new facilities for people who are currently rotting in almost 100 year old facilities now, it's just alarming that people think that people aren't deserving of that money and that amount of money, even though we've spent trillions of dollars incarcerating this nation anyway. I challenge people to ask yourself, what are you really saying when you're saying we should not spend this much money on these investments?

Interview facilitator:

In terms of ... I'm wondering if there are things that you think, in terms of promoting the health and supporting the health and wellbeing of incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, are there

any things that you've seen that have been working really well that you think should be built upon, or really invested in more?

Brandon Holmes:

You mean as far as existing programs that are happening?

Interview facilitator:

Piper: Yeah, existing programs or strategies. Doesn't have to be in New York City, it can be other places.

Brandon Holmes:

I think one program that's great is the JISH housing, Justice Involved Supportive Housing, J-I-S-H. While it can be improved, it is something that has been able to be expanded steadily over recent years. We're still waiting for a commitment on expanding it even further this year. But it gets to the root of, people don't just need to be released to the streets or released to a shelter. People need to be released with a stable housing opportunity and connection to a case manager or a case worker who can support them and, "What do you need? What are your appointments that you would like to get lined up?" And support them in that way. I think that needs to be something that we ... something that is just across the board that everyone ... It's just a right. When you are released from detention or incarceration, it is just a legal mandate that the city has to provide this opportunity, and not just the 1000 people who qualify for it or who have the recommendation to get into it. *[end transcript excerpt]*


Thank you for accepting written testimonies for the Public Hearing. For any questions about this written testimony, please reach out to us at rikersmemory@create-forward.com.

Sincerely,
The Rikers Public Memory Project

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Freedom
Agenda

Testimony to Commission on Community Reinvestment and Closing Rikers

May 30, 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.

While we were eagerly waiting for this Commission to resume its public hearings as required by law, we had conversations of our own with residents in communities with the highest rates of admission to Rikers. Between August and October 2024, in partnership with community based organizations, we organized forums in South Jamaica, Queens, Harlem, and the South Bronx, 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?," to which they had the opportunity to respond aloud or write responses on index cards.

Below, we've included a summary of the responses from these forums.

The work of this Commission is important, and we're glad these public hearings are starting. **We 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

Southeast Queens, August 2024

Summary of verbal or written responses from about 30 people

- Education (including social-emotional, vocational, higher ed, afterschool) - 15
- Housing (including supportive, affordable) - 5
- Counseling and treatment supports including mental health, substance use, people with disabilities - 12
- Legal support (including know your rights, legal and social work assistance) - 5
- Community centers - 5
- Alternative accountability (diversion programs, restorative justice) - 4
- Assistance for migrants and refugees - 1
- Free health care - 2
- Restoring voting rights for people incarcerated – 1

Full written responses

Free CUNY and Free Healthcare

Would like to see investments made in providing counseling/MH services for K-12 to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline that address MH crises and social issues in children with punitive and carceral measures that prime children for getting entangled and ensnared in the criminal industrial complex

Fund Right to Counsel for all zipcodes in Queens

Fund court social workers at arraignments (through PD offices) for client support at court
Real gun diversion programs in Queens

Fund youth court diversion services from probation, and toward community-led programs

I initially had a thought once someone what a question: why aren't our teachers or our community?
I recall all of my high school teachers being directly from Long Island and not from Rockaway. The requirements for a teacher is a masters degree - higher education is needed within the Far Rockaway community.

Providing services to children with mental health, intellectual disabilities, autism

More clinicians to provide culturally sensitive services

Waitlist with OPWDD are long

Pro social activities for youth

Vocational opportunities for youth and anyone who wants it

The punitive systems have not worked - it's time to consider restorative justice

The money should be used to send people to trade school, and should be used for housing. And we should have an act instated that has exchange inmates and give them the chance a real chance to make it in life

Training for youth for decent paying jobs or BI's management courses

Affordable counseling services

Investing in youth - job training, summer camps, mentoring

Mental health education in schools

Community housing centers to create family & a connection in neighborhoods

Supporting migrants, immigrants, refugees

Healthcare for all NYers

Housing support (long term)

Career/placement/trade school

Mind-body-spirit wellness (mindfulness, emotional/mental healthcare, guidance in care for one's self), alternative to 911 -> emergency mental health dispatch w/ trained empathes, community members

Restore incarcerated people's right to vote

Family enrichment centers

Community centers

Substance abuse programs

1A) Community centers owned and operated by members of the community who have shown and proven to be dedicated to uplifting the youth

1B) Investments into community development projects that not only help to enrich the lives of residents but also serve as employment opportunities for the residents of the community. The City should invest in STEM learning programs.

Investing in our educational system especially those Title1 population – more funds toward social emotional learning programs to help set a strong foundation for children and families cognitive and social development

Quality supportive housing: providing housing that includes social services for individuals with mental health issue, substance abuse and histories of incarceration can help stabilize lives

Re-entry services, restorative justice

South Bronx, September 2024

Summary of verbal and written responses from about 20 people

- Education and schools (including vocational programs, afterschool program, support for students who've dropped out, more social workers, and enrichment programs like arts and sports) - 17
- Programs for youth and young adults (including year-round and extended hours, entrepreneurship, counseling, employment, health awareness and prevention, arts, chess, robotics, cultural activities) - 14
- Healthcare, including hospitals and quality mental health services, particularly for people in reentry - 13
- Housing (affordable for people with low-incomes and those who are formerly homeless) - 7
- Recreational facilities and community centers - 6
- Transit (free, expanded routes) - 3
- Employment programs and workforce readiness - 2
- Early childhood development – 2
- Childcare – 2
- Libraries – 2
- Parks and green spaces - 2
- Family counseling and parenting classes – 2
- Restorative justice programs – 2
- Small business development – 1
- Lead pipe removal program – 1
- Community service programs – 1
- Social welfare programs – 1
- Access to nutritious food - 1

Full written responses

The money should go to 1) mental health, 2) school, 3) homeless...what will happen to the correction officers? Because they the ones aren't innocent. 1) Body cams, 2) screen them, 3) 90 days probation meaning don't get in any trouble

The money should be used towards resources like: affordable mental health services, community programs for the youth and adults, better quality food pantries, affordable housing and groceries.....Some investments can be preventative programs, NYPD training, workforce training

Youth Programs - year round....Community Centers....Mental Health Resources....Better Schools

It should be used for after school centers and low income housing alone; it can be used for more bus/train routes such as the proposed alexander ave line

We are to invest in our services. We need upgrading in our communities. Work with counseling families to communicate with each other. Coping skills for those incarcerated and their families.

When folks return to their communities, that there are community centers for them to be able to outreach and connect for employment. Self owned businesses. How to prepare, dress, and present oneself for those positions. Scare straight programs. Where you bring our children, youth community folks to these different incarcerated facilities to see the results of their crimes. Prevention programs.

Investment in child development, parenting classes and resources. Investment in resources for immigrants who will need to be integrated to the community

Poverty, lack of support from family community housing, community programs....prevention, more community centers for our youth, more support for our school dropouts, extend the age to find resources extend 16 to 24 to 16-35, housing, following up with people that suffer from mental health and substance abuse

Reinvested into education reform and resources for the Bronx, 2) creativity, employment, upgrading schools, 3) a lead pipe removal program for water lines in the Bronx

Any program or service that will help combat poverty and help people who are struggling, especially the youth. Expose the children to multiple positive recreational activities - sports, chess, robotics, art, dance, poetry, journalism, field trips to cultural centers like museums and sports stadiums. Help mothers and fathers who dealing with homelessness, addiction, unemployment, etc get back on their feet by receiving the wrap-around services and community support they need to be restored...We need ultimately a second bill of human rights which include the right to meaningful employment, the right to good health, the right to nutritious quality food and water, the right to worship and speak freely, and the right to peace and security for ourselves family and community. I know this was the mission of Martin Luther King Jr with his Poor People's Campaign but it was never realized. The Bronx and communities throughout this nation and the world need to build and forever sustain the heart-centered and people-oriented institutions that make a loving family, community, and society possible....Thank you for the work you do to help bring about a more just world....One last note: we need a Marshall plan for the Bronx. I forget where I heard this idea but I agree this is the kind of big picture thinking we need. As the Proverb says: "Without vision, the people perish."

Spend all the money on youth programs

Invest: programs for the community – help for jobs for the youth – program to help young people understand the health consequences of “smoking” cigarettes and other substances (and drug consumption) when the youth are not fully developed – vocational programs (like motorcycle, electric car repairs) to keep the youth busy.

Want it to be used for rehabilitation....fixing parks, jails

Plain and simple: jobs, jobs, jobs....we need extensive job training and education to insure this

I would like to see the money reinvested in social and public programs. There is a high rate of homelessness, addiction, and a lack of public spaces for kids to enjoy. There is a ton of garbage, and not enough green spaces. There is a lot that this community needs. Those already suffering from the effects of the various lacks need to be addressed but also there needs to be implementation of programs for kids so that they have more options. That looks like public libraries with engaging programming, investment in enriching programs for schools, arts, sports, etc. Also parks and after school programs. Many things.....Social workers instead of COs

Harlem, October 2024

Summary of written responses from 7 people

- Arts and music lessons (including for youth and people in reentry) - 2
- Community centers open to all – 1
- Mental health programs, including for all ages – 1
- Afterschool programs, including tutoring – 3
- Physical health programs – 1
- Family counseling, especially in early childhood – 1
- Bail bond fund – 1
- Access to nutritious food (including via local stores that create jobs) - 1
- Green jobs and training – 1
- Train community members as peacemakers – 1
- Reentry programs (including employment, housing, counseling) - 1

Full written responses

- Accessible arts, music lessons, for youth and individuals coming out of the prison system. Third places must be available to all community members
- Start early - ensure there are programs (such as afterschool programs, mental health programs as early as elementary school and throughout school years). Arts & music & physical health programs, emphasis on reading aptitude. Anything that will show children there is a wider world than their street or neighborhood. Family counseling via social workers in early years of childhood
- Kids need support for studies (tutors) and other afterschool programs - somewhere to go between school and the evening (when parents get home from work)
- Bail bond fund - could be a rotating fund - National Council of Churches used to have a bail fund, money would go to folks held only because they couldn't pay bail

- Many of the communities from which the prison population is drawn do not have adequate access to nutritious foods. Can some of the funds be used to create such grocery stores that would provide both food and employment?
- There is a shift in the job market toward green energy job. Can some of the funds be used to provide job training and employment? Think WEACTION
- Afterschool programs for youth
- Train community members to be peacemakers
- Re-entry educational programs for all leaving jail. For example, technical training, employment, and housing assistance and even spiritual guidance that would lead them to a faith based group that can assist in the reentry process

Re-entry and Re-investments and Restoration Committee of City Council of NY AFTER closing of the Disaster that is Rikers:

Yes; the inevitable is here. Rikers is closing BY LAW.

We all know sites in NY City that could benefit from a renewed cash flow in these times. Let's stop wasting money NOW.

Is it really \$500,000 per inmate at the eye-sore that is Rikers Island Jails complex for both women and men?

Think street repairs and lights (cf. Stratford Ave, Bx 10472), decent school cafeterias—and my schools do not even have open cafeterias!- lack of accessible and decent libraries and parks.

When will our great city of NY live up to its reputation as a place of real opportunity for the poor—and those who need a second chance?

Concreteness helps.

Show the denizens and victims of the bloated waste that is Rikers that they deserve better—as we also do in our challenged neighborhoods.

Thank you.

(Reverend) James Francis Sheehan, Jr

Pontifical STB

Archdiocese of New York

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May 28, 2025

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 the lived experiences of systemic injustice and driven by the hope 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 just 16, and again at 19. I know the trauma of that place not through headlines, but through lived experience. I've walked its hallways. I've felt the harm of being discarded by a system that criminalizes poverty and punishes youth instead of protecting them.

Closing Rikers cannot just be the end of a chapter. It must be the beginning of a new one—rooted in healing, investment, and opportunity for the communities it was built to cage.

To get there, we need your support.

We must **expand spaces that train youth and adults for tech jobs**, so our communities aren't left behind in the economy of tomorrow. We have the talent—we just need the access. Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn need real pipelines to tech careers now.

We must also **expand the Cure Violence program**, especially in Harlem. As summer approaches, so do the conditions that lead to violence—not because of who we are, but because of disinvestment. Credible messengers are saving lives—but they need real support to keep doing that work.

And we need to **invest in programs that reconnect Black and Brown communities with nature**—hiking, nature walks, open air. These are basic needs that help us heal and see beyond concrete and survival. Our people deserve that.

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.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Vidal Guzman