

Statement of Trish Marsik

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New York State Assembly

Devising a Smart Supportive Housing Strategy for Ex-Offenders upon Reentry
Committee on Corrections
Subcommittee on Transitional Services

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Good morning, Chair O'Donnell, Chair Sepulveda, and members of the Committees on Corrections and Sub-committee on Transitional Services. My name is Trish Marsik and I am the Executive Director of the Mayor's Task Force on Behavioral Health and the Criminal Justice System at the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice ("MOCJ"). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice advises the Mayor on public safety strategy and, together with partners inside and outside of government, develops and implements policies aimed at reducing crime, reducing unnecessary arrests and incarceration, promoting fairness, and building strong and safe neighborhoods.

The issue we are here to discuss today – supportive housing for people returning to New York City from jail or prison – should be seen in New York City's larger crime context. Over the last twenty years, New York City has experienced the sharpest drop in crime of any city in the nation. Every type of major crime has plummeted, and 2015 had the lowest yearly crime numbers in the modern Compstat era. And although in the rest of the country, jail and prison populations increased 11% between 1996 and 2013, New York City's jail population fell by over half. These trends provide proof that we can have both more safety and a lighter criminal justice touch.

Despite this progress, some stubborn system problems remain. One example – with great relevance to this hearing today – is that while the overall jail population has dropped, the percentage of the population with behavioral health needs has stayed largely constant, thus comprising a bigger and bigger percentage of the total number incarcerated. While in FY 2010, people with mental illness comprised 29% of the NYC jail population, today they represent approximately 40% of the overall jail population.

To solve this system problem, in 2014 the Mayor launched a \$130 million Task Force on Behavioral Health and the Criminal Justice System, a comprehensive roadmap to drive down crime while

also reducing the number of people with behavioral health issues cycling through the criminal justice system. This Task Force has three chief strategies: reduce the number of people with behavioral health needs who enter the criminal justice system, shorten the length of time they spend in the criminal justice system, and reduce the number who return. Supportive housing is a proven strategy to reduce the number who return, and one already operating with promising results in New York City.

Housing is foundational. A safe, reliable place to live can allow an individual the stability on which to build a healthy, independent and productive future. We see this on the level of personal anecdote – one of our supportive housing providers told me that when they approached an individual who has been cycling through jail and shelter while struggling with behavioral health needs for many years, the individual burst into tears, knowing that a home would be life-changing. And we also see this on the level of aggregate data: the Frequent Users System Engagement or FUSE program, a New York City program that provides the model for our current supportive housing program, was found to significantly decrease shelter, hospital and jail stays, generating an annual \$15,000 public cost savings per housed participant when measured against a comparison group.

Over the last six months in New York City, over fifty people have already been successfully connected with permanent supportive housing. One of the most important aspects of our current supportive housing program is targeting: the fifty people we have placed were identified during an intensive data match in which we found over 1,000 individuals who have at least five jail admissions and five shelter stays within the last four years. For the first supportive housing beds, we focused on the 400 “highest use” individuals among this population, who entered the City’s custody an average of 12.42 times, and had an average total length of stay in jail of 374.86 days over a period of 4 years. To date, the City has brought 120 scatter-site supportive housing beds online targeted at this population and is working to fill them. Given the size of the need and the effectiveness of this intervention, it is crucial that supportive housing be available for justice-involved populations, particularly those with behavioral health needs.

While housing is foundational, it must be part of larger efforts to: 1) identify individuals with behavioral health needs at every point in the criminal justice system and connect them to appropriate care and 2) create a robust re-entry strategy for all individuals returning to New York City from prison and jail. I want to mention a few highlights from each strategy here, as they are necessary to ensure not only the long-term success of supportive housing but of overarching efforts to reduce the number of people who return to jail.

To effectively address behavioral health needs throughout the criminal justice system, the City is currently:

- Piloting behavioral health screening at arraignments, during which nurse practitioners and other health professionals are identifying those with immediate behavioral health needs, as well connecting to their treating providers for care and potential diversion;
- Engaging in extensive planning to make sure that discharge of individuals with behavioral health issues sets them up for successful re-entry through linkages with appropriate public

benefits and supports, including public health insurance, and has expanded existing discharge planning contracts (I-CAN) to serve an additional 4100 individuals;

- Ensuring minimal disruptions in public health insurance coverage by improving connections to Medicaid and benefits upon release from jail; and
- Launching in-house Department of Probation behavioral health teams that provide advisory services in the screening and assessment of the behavioral health needs of individuals on probation, connecting them to clinical and concrete community-based services.

Additionally, to create a robust re-entry strategy for all individuals returning to New York City from prison and jail, our office has recently convened a multidisciplinary council of 54 organizations and agencies – including City government agency representatives, the courts, district attorneys, defenders, providers, members of the faith community, formerly incarcerated individuals, and advocates. The Council will work to comprehensively understand populations in need through conducting a deep analytic dive to understand the risk, service needs, and characteristics of the target population in order to identify opportunities for intervention and then map available re-entry options and develop solutions to address unmet needs.

I am thankful for your focus today on supportive housing and its importance as a re-entry strategy, and for your long-standing commitment to this crucial issue. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. I would be happy to answer any questions.