

Good morning, Chairs, Members of the Committee, and distinguished guests. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of the Treatment Court Expansion Act.

My name is Laura Robinson, and I am a Licensed Mental Health Clinician in New York State and an active community participant. For more than a decade, I have worked with individuals whose behavioral health needs intersect with the justice system. And I have seen, time and again, that Treatment Courts are not only life-changing — they are lifesaving.

I began my career working in Manhattan and Brooklyn with alternatives-to-incarceration programs. In those courtrooms, I met clients struggling with serious mental health conditions and substance use disorders. For many, their charges were symptoms of untreated illness, not acts of criminal intent. When they were offered treatment instead of punishment, they stabilized, reconnected with their communities, and completely changed the course of their lives.

Later, when I relocated to Western New York, I saw stark contrasts in how Treatment Courts are implemented across the state. In some counties, these courts were collaborative and restorative. In others, punitive responses remained the default, and people fell back into cycles of recidivism simply because their underlying conditions went untreated. Incarceration rarely solves these problems. The Treatment Court Expansion Act offers a smarter, more humane approach: treatment first, accountability second.

Treatment is not a straight line. Recovery happens with setbacks, and success depends on persistence, opportunity, and a team of peers, case managers, therapists, social workers, nurses, psychiatrists, and physicians. Just as importantly, treatment extends far beyond the clinic. It means stable housing, counseling, medication, job training, continued education, family reunification, trauma-informed care, and recovery coaching. These are the interventions that restore lives and break the cycle of justice involvement.

Let me share one example:

While working with the Nathaniel Assertive Community Treatment Team — a five-borough mobile response unit for people facing felony convictions — I worked with a client charged with assault. The incident was the direct result of untreated Schizophrenia and internal voices that pushed them into crisis.

This person spent 29 months on Rikers Island before receiving a proper diagnosis and medication. For years, they had been denied the help they desperately needed. It should not take an arrest to access treatment.

Through Treatment Court, this client was finally released to our team. With support, they stabilized their mental health, secured housing, and even enrolled in school. Most powerfully, after graduating from the program, they apologized directly to the person harmed, demonstrating not only accountability but the ability to live a safe, healthy, and law-abiding life. That transformation was not the product of incarceration. It was the result of treatment and accountability working together.

Now living in Buffalo, I have also seen significant gaps in the system. While some courts embrace collaboration with treatment providers and respect clinical recommendations, too often potential candidates are overlooked, diagnoses are used against them, and clients' efforts toward treatment goals are second-guessed. Licensed clinicians are sometimes denied a voice in the courtroom, while non-clinical staff make treatment recommendations. I have seen individuals held in Treatment Court for over a decade on a misdemeanor charge, deepening justice-system trauma rather than resolving it. I have also observed abstinence being required as the only path to sobriety — a practice that can endanger clients who need a safe, medically supported taper. We cannot have a faithful system if it is practiced in bad faith.

The Treatment Court Expansion Act addresses these gaps. It expands eligibility to people with mental health and substance use disorders, even in some felony cases. It removes the guilty-plea requirement that discourages participation. It reinforces that completing treatment leads to dismissal of charges, while failure returns the case to traditional court, preserving accountability.

Over the years, I have watched people once trapped in cycles of incarceration become employees, parents, neighbors, and mentors because they were offered treatment instead of punishment. They earned diplomas, secured jobs, stabilized their health, and reunited with family — outcomes that incarceration alone could never achieve.

By passing the Treatment Court Expansion Act, you are investing in restoration, not just retribution. You are choosing to see the whole person, not just their charge sheet. You are equipping New Yorkers with the tools they need to succeed.

And you are sending a powerful message: that justice in New York is about healing, not only punishment; about second chances, not permanent labels; about safer and healthier communities built through compassion and accountability.

This is not a concession. This is a commitment — a smart investment in public safety, in equity, and in human dignity.

Thank you for your leadership, and I respectfully urge you to pass the Treatment Court Expansion Act.