

Dear members of the Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Use Disorders.

My name is Justyna Rzewinski, I am a member of Freedom Agenda and SWASC-Social Workers and Allies Against Solitary Confinement. I am also a licensed clinical social worker. From December 2023 to September 2024, I worked in the mental health units on Rikers Island, specifically the MOU and PACE units, places that are supposed to provide the highest level of treatment. What I witnessed there was devastating. Just last year, on October 8th, I testified about the practice of deadlocking people with serious mental illness. Not a single day has passed since that I haven't thought about those I left behind to suffer. And it pains me deeply to sit here now, one year later, and know that so little has changed.

I saw people with serious mental illness locked in cells without medication, without therapy, and without meaningful human contact. They deteriorated until they were smearing feces, banging on doors, and crying out for help. These were not acts of defiance; they were the visible symptoms of untreated illness. The most haunting example was Ardit Billa, who was found dead in the PACE unit with feces smeared in his cell.

And the truth is this: nobody is receiving meaningful mental health treatment on Rikers. People are warehoused in cages, left to deteriorate, and then sent back into our communities more traumatized, more destabilized, and in worse condition than when they entered. Rikers is not a place of healing, it is a place of harm.

This crisis is not an exception. In New York City jails today, 1 in 5 people, 21%, are flagged as having a serious mental illness, and about half have some mental health diagnosis. Nationally, nearly 44% of people in local jails report a history of mental illness, yet 63% of incarcerated people with mental health conditions never receive treatment while inside.

That is why I strongly support the Treatment Court Expansion Act. Right now, New York operates under a patchwork of limited drug courts and underutilized mental health courts. This bill modernizes and expands that system to provide a statewide, evidence-based public health solution.

The TCEA does three important things. It expands eligibility to include people with a wide range of mental health diagnoses who are currently excluded. It ensures that licensed clinicians, not judges or prosecutors, make treatment decisions. It embraces a pre-plea model for nonviolent cases, so people can access treatment immediately without being forced to plead guilty first. This legislation will not only make our communities safer and healthier, it will also save lives and money. Experts estimate that expanding treatment

courts could cut recidivism in half, grow employment rates by 50%, and save New York State nearly \$2 billion in reduced jail and prison costs over five years.

I spoke out as a whistleblower about the inhumane conditions I witnessed at Rikers because silence was complicity. Today, I speak out again because every person deserves the chance to heal, not to die in a cell smeared with feces.

Passing the Treatment Court Expansion Act is not just good policy, it is a moral obligation.

Thank you,

Justyna Rzewinski, LCSW

Email-justyna.lcsw@gmail.com