

EXPANDING ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION IN NYC:

A PATHWAY TO SAFELY CLOSING RIKERS ISLAND



NYC ATI &
REENTRY
COALITION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York City is at a pivotal moment in its criminal justice reform journey, driven largely by the urgent need to close Rikers Island, the notorious jail complex known widely for rampant human rights violations, dangerous conditions, and a deeply entrenched culture of abuse and impunity.¹ Following a protracted battle to shutter the compound often referred to as "Torture Island," the New York City Council passed legislation in 2019 mandating the closure of all jails on Rikers by 2027.²

For nearly 100 years, Rikers has been used to warehouse Black and brown New Yorkers from under-resourced and over-policed neighborhoods, the majority of whom face substance use and/or mental health challenges.³ Further, over 85% of those currently incarcerated at Rikers are held pretrial—meaning they are legally innocent - due primarily to their inability to afford bail.⁴ On top of the individual suffering Rikers perpetuates, the associated financial and social costs to New Yorkers citywide are enormous and ongoing. Incarceration simply cannot continue to be a means to circumvent substantive health and economic interventions for our marginalized communities. The City must promptly utilize all possible outlets to stem the persistent flow of people struggling with chronic health conditions and poverty into the jail and reduce the population that is currently detained to ensure timely closure.

While this report covers the pressing need to close Rikers and details how ATIs can be employed and scaled to do so, we are clear that expanded application of ATIs alone will not fully decarcerate Rikers. The City must also instruct the Department of Correction to fully implement its 6-A Work Release program and empower the Local Conditional Release Commission to use their authority to release eligible individuals. Concurrently, we must expand prevention measures to help keep unhoused New Yorkers and those struggling with mental illness and/or substance use disorder (SUD) from becoming entangled in the criminal legal system to begin with. This includes, but is not limited to: the expansion of crisis respite centers with 24-hour peer supports; the development of additional clubhouses for people with mental illness; efforts to fund and site transitional and supportive housing; more on-ramps to SUD treatment and harm reduction services; robust mentoring and supports to young people; and investments in public infrastructure, like free access to transportation.

Turning back to ATIs, their expansion in New York City is essential, not only to shutter Rikers once and for all, but also to promote a stronger, more sustainable culture of public safety at large. In the following pages, you will read about the effectiveness of these programs in yielding new opportunities and positive outcomes for participants (as told by participants themselves), which in turn leads to better outcomes for their families and our shared communities throughout the five boroughs. We believe that New York can and should pave the way to a system of justice that promotes people over punishment and provides the comprehensive supports necessary for all New Yorkers to thrive.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE: THE HARMS OF INCARCERATION AT RIKERS ISLAND

Nationwide, Rikers Island has come to exemplify the most egregious systemic failures within the criminal legal system, where detained individuals face conditions that are as unsafe as they are inhumane.⁵

In 2015, a federal court appointed a monitor to observe and report on conditions as part of an ongoing case about unconstitutional levels of violence and abuse perpetrated on young people held there.⁶ The reports, issued quarterly, detail pervasive neglect, brutal violence, and delinquent healthcare.⁷ Despite years of mandated reforms, the federal monitor has found the agency in charge, the New York City Department of Correction (DOC), consistently incapable of safely managing those in its care. Untreated medical emergencies and suspected overdoses and suicides, often exacerbated by staff neglect and lack of oversight, represent some of the most common preventable failures that have tragically claimed the lives of more than 60 people held there in the last five years alone.^{8,9}

Every day, individuals detained at Rikers endure unsanitary, overcrowded conditions that jeopardize their physical and emotional health. Cells and common areas are frequently infested with vermin, and access to basic hygiene products like soap, toilet paper, menstrual products, and clean water is inconsistent at best—though more commonly altogether nonexistent. Reports describe piles of trash, human waste, and a lack of adequate sanitation, creating conditions that heighten the risk of infectious diseases and worsen chronic health issues.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, individuals incarcerated at Rikers have higher rates of chronic health conditions, including HIV and hepatitis C as well as pulmonary and cardiovascular disease, compared to the general public.¹¹

Mental health care is similarly inadequate despite more than 55% of Rikers' population having a Brad H classification (designating a mental health diagnosis) and at least 20% having been diagnosed with a Serious Mental Illness (SMI).¹² And yet, where Rikers de facto operates as the City's largest psychiatric ward, evidence-based treatment services are limited and unreliable, leaving many in crisis without critical support.

Recently, media reports have detailed routine incidents of “deadlocking,” the practice of arbitrarily locking individuals with SMI in their cells for weeks or months at a time, effectively cutting individuals off from health care, medication, and support services.¹³

The prevalence of SUDs, often co-occurring with mental health conditions, is equally alarming: as of October 2024, more than half of Rikers' population had a diagnosed SUD.¹⁴ While Correctional Health Services offers medication for addiction treatment (MAT), incarcerated individuals with SUDs nonetheless face constant isolation and stigmatization from corrections officers that undermine the treatment's efficacy. Further, the MAT provided is not paired with trauma counseling, therapy, nor access to housing and employment services prior to reentry, which are essential wraparound supports for any individual undergoing treatment. Unsurprisingly, the result of depriving people in need of comprehensive care is an environment where self-harm and suicide attempts are tragically common.¹⁵

Incarceration at Rikers, even when not deadly, has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the individuals detained there. Harms permeate the neighborhoods from which they come, undermining public safety and destabilizing entire communities. We know that 70% of people detained at Rikers are released back to the City, as opposed to being sent to prison.¹⁶ By warehousing people in inhumane conditions without addressing the root causes of their justice-involvement and then releasing them without adequate treatment or support, individuals often return to their communities more destabilized than when they left, further straining families and local resources.

The reality is, Rikers only perpetuates cycles of negative impacts, yielding persistent and unquantifiable suffering both within and beyond its walls. As a former DOC Commissioner aptly described it, Rikers “makes everyone who encounters it worse.”¹⁷

Instead of fostering safety, Rikers’ punitive approach tears at the fabric of communities already suffering from systemic disinvestment and over-policing, ultimately reducing our collective ability to build a thriving and secure City for all.



ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION IN NEW YORK CITY

Decades of research demonstrate that ATIs are more effective than incarceration at improving public safety outcomes,¹⁸ decreasing recidivism,¹⁹ improving employment rates,²⁰ and generating significant savings for taxpayers.²¹ Across New York City, ATI and reentry programs, which support successful community reintegration upon individuals’ release from incarceration, have reduced both homelessness and psychiatric hospitalizations while increasing health-seeking behavior, relational connections, and overall desistance from crime.²²

Economic Empowerment through Employment and Housing

For many returning individuals, securing stable housing and employment poses a significant challenge. Stigma, limited work experience, and legal restrictions make it difficult for people with histories of arrest and conviction to find meaningful employment. In fact, more than 60% of individuals released from New York prisons remain unemployed a year after release.²³ Where these barriers often force people into precarious, low-wage jobs, pathways to stability remain tenuous at best.²⁴ Studies have shown that New York State loses more than \$12.6 billion in earnings annually by shutting people with convictions out of the workforce.²⁵ However, community-based ATIs can benefit local economies by connecting people to employment opportunities and boosting the workforce.

For instance, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) provides transitional job placements, which have been shown to reduce re-arrest rates among participants by 50%, illustrating the power of economic empowerment to promote desistance from crime and long-term stability.²⁶

Housing, like employment, is another foundational need. More than 26% of New Yorkers incarcerated at Rikers report being homeless or likely to become homeless upon release, and many more are housing insecure.²⁷ **The Fortune Society offers a continuum of housing from emergency and transitional to permanent and supportive, including to ATI participants.²⁸**

ATIs not only recognize the critical intersection of housing and employment in breaking cycles that fuel criminal legal system involvement, but they provide the foundation necessary for self-sufficiency and the tools to help people achieve sustainable financial independence.

J'Adore's Transformation: Caregiving to Create Caregivers

When J'Adore was 19, he was arrested for gun possession. Faced with the possibility of a lengthy prison sentence, his public defender secured him a referral to BronxConnect's ATI program where he embarked on a six-month commitment that would challenge him to completely reimagine his future and take the steps necessary to achieve it.

Before joining BronxConnect, J'Adore described himself as stagnant and unsure of his direction. Though he had graduated high school, he took a year off from pursuing higher education and felt stuck. "I didn't know what I wanted to do or where I was headed."

Initially, he narrowly saw BronxConnect as a way to fulfill court requirements and avoid further trouble. But as he began attending its workshops and engaging with the staff, he realized the program offered much more.

"At first, I just wanted to get my certificate and move on, but once I got into it, I started learning things I never knew I needed. I should've been in programs like this a long time ago."

BronxConnect required him to attend programming four days a week, which included employment readiness workshops, anger management sessions, and participation in harm reduction groups. Through employment readiness, he

learned practical skills like writing resumes, preparing for interviews, and presenting himself professionally. “I didn’t just learn how to get a job—I learned how to see myself as someone who could thrive in a career.”

Coming from a large family, J’Adore often took on caregiving responsibilities for his younger siblings and nephew, and while he found fulfillment in these roles, he hadn’t considered that they might point to a career. The newfound confidence he found through BronxConnect helped him realize that his caregiving experience could translate into a meaningful profession in childcare, and the staff was there to support him in actively exploring his potential in this field.

The anger management workshops proved equally transformative. J’Adore reflected on how the sessions helped him identify and manage triggers that had previously led to conflict for him. Not only did he learn to better manage his own anger but he also learned how to better navigate relationships at home and within his community. “I didn’t even realize some of the things that would set me off until we talked about them in group. Now, I know how to recognize my emotions and handle them before they take over and possibly get me into trouble.”

J’Adore also found connection and inspiration in his violence harm reduction group, led by a mentor who provided guidance and relatability. “It’s one thing to hear advice, but it’s different when it comes from someone who’s been where you’ve been—it just really hits home with me.”

What stood out most to J’Adore was the genuine care and encouragement he received from BronxConnect staff. His case manager checked in frequently, ensuring he stayed on track and felt supported. “She made sure I didn’t miss a session and always asked about my family.” Small gestures, like providing snacks for his younger brother, deeply moved him. “That meant a lot to me—it showed me they cared about me and my family.” These acts of kindness reinforced his belief that he was surrounded by people who truly wanted him to succeed, and the relationships formed made BronxConnect feel more like a community than a program, motivating him to give his full effort.

As J’Adore progressed through the program with perfect attendance, he came to see the entire experience as a critical anchor in his life. BronxConnect’s structured schedule and supportive environment replaced former negative influences and gave him space to focus on his personal growth. “When I’m in the program, I’m not out there doing random stuff. It’s a routine that keeps me grounded and always moving forward.”

J’Adore is set to graduate from BronxConnect in January 2025, armed with the skills, confidence, and vision to build a better future. He plans to pursue certifications in childcare and looks forward to turning his passion for helping children into a career. J’Adore’s story underscores the importance of ATIs in creating meaningful change. His journey is a testament to how these programs equip individuals to rebuild their lives and contribute to safer, stronger communities for us all.

“This program didn’t just help me with my legal case—it helped me with my life. I see how these programs can change lives. They give you hope, they give you direction, and they give you the tools to make a real difference.”



Social Empowerment through Community Engagement and Reintegration

Discrimination and attendant stigma facing formerly incarcerated people often make it difficult for them to meaningfully participate in our shared communities. Limited social support leaves individuals isolated, increasing their vulnerability to reoffending as they struggle to find acceptance and purpose within society. ATIs, on the other hand, promote family reunification and community engagement through strategies like family therapy, support groups, community-based workshops, and mentorship opportunities.

The Osborne Association, for example, provides programming to help individuals rebuild family connections and create a stable support system as they navigate diversion, thus enhancing their sense of belonging and accountability.

Similarly, mentorship serves as a powerful tool for transforming lives, especially for justice-involved youth who often lack access to stable guidance and support systems. **BronxConnect provides such programming, pairing justice-involved youth with mentors who help guide them through life's challenges and serve as positive role models.²⁹ Such mentorship fosters personal growth, reduces criminal behavior, and offers youth the guidance they need to become productive adults.³⁰**

The bottom line is that people who feel invested in their communities are more likely to thrive in those communities. By building networks of social support, ATIs incentivize participants to engage and remain in the community and avoid further entanglement with the criminal legal system.

Corinthian's Transformation: From Skepticism to Community Leader

When Corinthian first walked into the Fortune Society, he was weighed down by skepticism. "I didn't trust anyone, let alone people in the system, so I wore sunglasses and a COVID mask just trying to keep my head down." He had been diverted to Fortune as part of a court-mandated program for a gun-related felony. Instead of facing incarceration and a potentially life-altering felony conviction, Corinthian was given the opportunity to participate in a one-year diversion program tailored to address underlying behaviors and support rehabilitation.



The program required Corinthian to attend sessions two days a week, each lasting three to four hours. These sessions focused on Alternatives to Violence, Thinking for a Change workshops, and personalized mentoring sessions. Recognizing his commitment to maintaining employment as a store manager, Fortune Society accommodated his schedule, ensuring he could complete the program without jeopardizing his job. This flexibility allowed Corinthian to integrate the program into his life without significant disruption, providing him with a sense of agency and stability.

Corinthian was unsure whether this program would have any effect in his life—initially, Fortune felt like another place where he would have to protect himself, but as he began participating in the workshops, something shifted. The Alternatives to Violence training provided him with practical tools to de-escalate tense situations in his daily life. Corinthian recounted how one lesson taught him to recognize his triggers and use calming strategies like stepping away or using assertive,

non-aggressive communication. "That alone has saved me more than once," he noted, reflecting on how this approach allowed him to not react negatively to a difficult, disgruntled customer at work. "It's not just about avoiding fights; it's about handling things with dignity and control."

The Thinking for a Change sessions helped Corinthian reframe the way he approached challenges, from workplace pressures to personal relationships. He described one exercise where participants were asked to examine their thought patterns in moments of frustration and brainstorm alternative responses. Over time, this process of self-reflection became second nature, empowering Corinthian to make thoughtful decisions that aligned with his goals. "It made me realize how much my first reaction didn't have to be my only reaction."

The key turning point in his journey came when Fortune recognized Corinthian's immense growth and exemplary participation in the program. Seeing how he had not only embraced the tools provided to him but also inspired others, they created a special recognition in his honor: the Client of the Month Award. This recognition was a huge personal milestone for Corinthian and a clear representation of Fortune's approach of celebrating progress and uplifting participants in their programs. "That award changed how I saw myself. It wasn't just about completing the program; it was a reminder that I was setting a new standard—not just for me, but for everyone coming after me."

Today, Corinthian serves as a Community Navigator in the Fortune Society's Atlas Hope partnership, a community violence intervention program aimed at reducing gun violence in the South Bronx by engaging high-risk, justice-impacted men aged 25 to 40. As a credible messenger, Corinthian builds trust with participants, guiding them through the year-long program that includes Cognitive Behavioral Intervention (CBI) workshops, transitional jobs paying \$22 an hour, professional development tools, and permanent job placement upon conclusion. He also conducts intake assessments to identify participants' specific needs and connects them to other supportive services offered by Fortune, such as housing, mental health care, or substance use treatment.

"My goal is to give these individuals the support and stability they need to prosper through our program. I've been where they are, and now it's my turn to help them see what's possible."

Reflecting on his journey, Corinthian sees his work not only as a way to give back, but also as a continuation of the transformation he began at Fortune. Through his efforts, Corinthian embodies Fortune's mission to create safer, more resilient communities by addressing systemic trauma, fostering personal growth, and providing the tools and opportunities people need to thrive. "It's not just about staying out of trouble. It's about building a life you—and your community—can be proud of."

Khamel's Transformation: The Power of Possibilities for NYC Youth

At just 16 years old, Khamel was at a crossroads. Having dropped out of school and knowing little about how to find a job or build a future, he found himself drawn into street life, searching for belonging in dangerous places. The streets offered him a sense of brotherhood and identity that he lacked at home and school, but without guidance or guardrails, this path led him to drugs, gang culture, violence, and ultimately into the criminal legal system. "I was dealing with pretty much everything negative you could think about. I thought the streets were my only option."

When Khamel entered exalt's youth program, everything began to change. Designed specifically for young people between the ages of 15 and 19 who have had criminal justice involvement, exalt introduced him to a world of possibilities he never imagined. For the first time, he was exposed to the professional world through classes that taught him essential skills like writing resumes, preparing cover letters, and excelling in interviews. He learned about workplace integrity, accountability, and the tools needed to create a future off the streets. "The program at exalt taught me how to build a killer resume and ace interviews with confidence."

Beyond these practical tools and skills that became the foundation for his journey toward stability and success, exalt gave him a critical understanding of the systemic barriers he faced, including lessons on the school-to-prison pipeline and the overrepresentation of Black and brown youth in the criminal legal system. These insights allowed him to navigate through these obstacles more effectively and ultimately advocate for others confronted with the same barriers.



The program also offered Khameel mentorship, both from peers who had been through the program and from adults who he perceived as credible messengers, transforming his perspective on himself and his potential. For the first time in his life, he had positive male role models who validated his experiences, celebrated his growth, and encouraged him to aim higher. These connections gave him the confidence to distance himself from negative influences and begin reimagining his future. One mentor even celebrated his birthday, a simple yet profound gesture that made Khameel feel valued and supported. "It was heartwarming. I had never had that kind of encouragement before. I felt like I was finally seen."

A pivotal moment for Khameel came during an overnight summer camp hosted by the program. It was his first time leaving New York City on his own, and the experience opened his eyes to a broader world. This exposure deepened his desire to pursue a meaningful path. "It was life-changing. Seeing different people, interacting with different cultures—it made me realize how big the world really is and that there's more out there for me than the life I thought I was stuck with."

Through exalt, Khameel was also connected to educational opportunities that helped him build a solid foundation for his future. He was referred to a GED program, and after successfully completing it, they supported him in the process of enrolling in college. Additionally, exalt's internship partnerships provided him hands-on professional experience while taking classes, helping him to further fortify his foundation for future professional success. By the time he completed the program, he was no longer a dropout spending time in the streets—he was a confident young man with a clear sense of purpose.

Today, Khamel serves on the Manhattan Community Board 1 Youth Committee, where he works alongside other young leaders to influence policies that affect his peers and community. He is also a recipient of the 2024 Freedom Fund Scholarship, which has helped him continue his education and advocacy work.

Khamel credits exalt's holistic approach with not only keeping him out of trouble but teaching him how to thrive. Their structured lessons on workplace and life skills continue to shape his professional development, while the mentorship and encouragement he received inspires him to help others. "I see myself as a flower in the woodworks, people poured into me, and now it's my turn to pour into others."

For Khamel, exalt was more than a program—it was a lifeline. Today, he advocates for ATIs like exalt, emphasizing their role in preventing and breaking cycles of harm and building stronger communities.

"It helped me unlock my potential and gave me the confidence to believe in myself, to see my worth, and to strive for success. If I had access to programs like this earlier, I could have avoided years of bad choices. Prevention is key. Through exalt, I discovered the world of youth advocacy and civic engagement, opening doors I didn't even know existed—it showed me that I could make a difference, not only in my own life, but also in the lives of others."



Improving Individual and Public Health through Mental Health and Substance Use Care

ATIs can also help address public health concerns, particularly through targeted interventions for mental and substance use disorders, which the majority of people detained at Rikers suffer from, often co-occurring. Yet, even though Rikers houses

more people diagnosed with SMI than any other facility in the state, it is ill-equipped to provide quality or even stabilizing care. Individuals incarcerated there routinely report being denied access to mental health evaluations, clinical appointments, and even medication.³¹ DOC has openly acknowledged these shortcomings and the devastating consequences of gaps in care: “Beyond the immediate risks [of self-harm and acute crisis], the lasting impact of unaddressed trauma on individuals is profound. It can lead to chronic mental health conditions, substance misuse, difficulty maintaining relationships and employment, and increased involvement in the criminal justice system.”³² Research substantiates that incarceration worsens symptoms associated with mental disorders.³³

CASES’ Nathaniel ACT program for people who have SMI and are facing felony charges demonstrates how treating underlying health issues is both more humane and effective than incarcerating individuals with such conditions. Participants are connected to a comprehensive mobile treatment team that directly provides psychiatric care and therapy, medication management, nursing, peer support, food, clothing, housing, and employment support. These interventions have shown measurable success, with participants experiencing a 70% reduction in homelessness and a 50% reduction in psychiatric hospitalizations. Following participants for two years after their completion of court monitoring, 94% had no new felony convictions, and 100% had no new violent felony convictions.³⁴

As noted earlier in this report, while the City’s Correctional Health Services (CHS) maintains a program at Rikers, the environment itself is not conducive to successful recovery as individuals with SUDs are frequently stigmatized, isolated, and punished by correctional staff. Research has made clear that SUD treatment in jails is rarely comprehensive nor patient-centered. According to DOC, from 2021 to 2023, self-reported substance misuse increased by at least 47%. At their own admission though, DOC and CHS do not have the capacity to ensure that individuals struggling with SUD get access to the services they actually need.³⁵

In stark contrast, community-based ATI programs, like the Center for Community Alternatives’ Crossroads to Recovery, provide outpatient SUD treatment tailored to individuals’ needs in a non-stigmatizing environment. Programs like CCA’s not only provide access to MAT, but they also effectively stabilize participants by providing counseling, employment services, and educational supports and ensure their continued wellbeing through robust recovery services.

People receiving comprehensive health care and tailored services through community-based ATIs experience improved individual health outcomes, greater stability, and are better equipped to contribute positively to their communities—and this in turn improves public health and safety, all while saving taxpayer dollars and reducing the financial strain on emergency services and correctional healthcare systems.

Art’s Transformation: A Promising Pathway through Treatment

For eight months, Art languished at Rikers where he received no treatment to address the substance use and behavioral health challenges that led to his incarceration in the first place. The lack of support left him stuck in a cycle of frustration and uncertainty, until the Osborne Association’s ATI program provided him a path forward.

Through Osborne’s court advocacy and mitigation services, which provided the judge overseeing Art’s case with a comprehensive picture of his situation and potential for rehabilitation, Art was offered a chance to participate in an inpatient substance use treatment program at Samaritan Daytop Village, a New York-based human services organization.

“The Osborne team didn’t just see what I had done—they saw who I could be. They fought to get the judge to see that too.”

After entering Samaritan, Art’s demeanor changed dramatically. He excelled as the program provided him with tools to reflect on his past and build a sustainable path forward, including relapse prevention workshops, anger management training, and cognitive-behavioral interventions like “Thinking for Change.” Art explained how these programs changed his mindset: “Thinking for Change taught me to step back and think before I act. Instead of letting my emotions take over, I learned how to problem-solve and look at the bigger picture. That’s something I’ll carry with me every day.”

Relapse prevention, another key part of Art’s programming, equipped him to navigate future threats to his recovery. He learned to identify the stressors and emotional triggers that contributed to his substance use in the past and practiced techniques to manage cravings and high-risk situations. “Relapse prevention gave me tools I didn’t even know I needed. Now I know how to recognize when I’m heading down the wrong path and how to pull myself back. It’s not just about staying clean—it’s about staying focused on what I want for my future.”

In addition to securing Art’s placement at Samaritan, Osborne ensured Art had access to broader reentry resources, including peer mentorship, trauma-informed counseling, and employment readiness programs, and they will continue to remain available to him for as long as he needs. “Knowing that they were there for me, will be here for me—I don’t feel like I’m doing any of this alone.”

Art was able to complete his inpatient programming after just six months. The judge overseeing his case praised his dedication and acknowledged the tremendous effort he put into turning his life around. This validation, coupled with the ongoing structured supports offered by Osborne, has given Art the motivation to continue moving forward. “I feel like I have a second chance—not just to make up for my mistakes, but to prove to myself and others that I can succeed.

Art’s story stands as a powerful testament to the transformative impact of ATIs like the one offered by the Osborne Association. By emphasizing healing, empowerment, and stability over punishment, Art was better able to tap into and channel his own resilience and determination to rebuild his life.

“Osborne didn’t just help me turn things around—they gave me the foundation to build something better for myself and my family.”



Building Health Equity through Gender-Responsive and Trauma-Informed Support

The number of women and gender-expansive individuals incarcerated at Rikers has increased by over 60% since January 2022, far out-pacing overall increases in the jail's population.³⁶ Detained at the Rose M. Singer Center (the women's facility on Rikers), these individuals face significantly high rates of mental disorders (82% have a diagnosed mental illness³⁷) in addition to other unique challenges: 70% percent are caregivers and at least 93% have reported experiences of domestic and/or sexual violence prior to their incarceration.³⁸ ATIs and reentry services that employ trauma-informed approaches are essential for addressing such specific needs of justice-involved women and gender-expansive individuals.

Recognizing that the criminal legal system involvement of many women and gender-expansive individuals often stems from coping mechanisms developed in response to domestic abuse, sexual violence, and economic insecurity, trauma-informed care focuses on creating a safe, supportive environment that acknowledges how trauma impacts peoples' lives.

For gender-expansive individuals, ATIs can provide affirming care, reduce the risk of violence, and offer tailored mental health support. Similarly, ATIs designed for caregivers often include parenting support and services that facilitate family reunification to mitigate the harm of separation caused by incarceration and reduce intergenerational trauma.³⁹ By addressing these specific vulnerabilities, ATIs help to address the overrepresentation of women and gender-expansive individuals in the criminal legal system and ensure more equitable outcomes for all participants.

Justice Home, a program offered by the Women's Prison Association (WPA), offers gender-responsive services including counseling, safe housing, employment training, and peer support, providing a critical foundation for participants' healing and growth.⁴⁰

The benefits of such programming are clear: women who successfully complete such ATIs are 40% less likely than men to be re-arrested within a year, showcasing their potential for success with the right supports.⁴¹

Programs like SHERO (formerly the Women’s Community Justice Project) and The Women’s Project also demonstrate the effectiveness of gender-responsive, trauma-informed approaches. Since 2017, SHERO has worked with over 300 women and gender-expansive individuals diverted from Rikers, with a re-arrest rate of less than 1%. Similarly impressive, 93% of participants in The Women’s Project have avoided felony re-arrest.⁴²

Collectively, these programs not only improve individual and family outcomes, but they also contribute to safer, more connected communities at large. Expanding ATIs that cater to the specific needs of participants is not just a matter of equity, it is also a critical step toward creating a justice system that prioritizes rehabilitation, empowerment, and long-term societal stability.

Carole’s Transformation: Healing Wounds through Community Interventions

Years of domestic abuse, addiction, and incarceration left Carole feeling broken and uncertain about her future. “I didn’t know if I could ever rebuild my life.” But the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) provided her with something she hadn’t experienced before—a space for healing and shared experience tailored to the needs of women impacted by substance use and the criminal legal system.



Carole entered CCA’s Crossroads to Recovery, an OASAS-licensed program designed specifically to help justice-impacted women with substance use disorders. Over the course of 26 months, Carole participated in SUD treatment, trauma-informed counseling, and vocational training all through an individualized plan that stressed a personal journey to recovery while also receiving referrals to

critical resources such as housing and mental health services. The program's long-term support gave Carole the time and tools she needed to heal and rebuild her sense of self. "I finally felt seen. Being in a space where I could talk about what I went through, without judgment—it was life-changing."

CCA's structured program emphasized restorative approaches that helped Carole confront and process her past while building a foundation for the future. She was given the space to better understand what precipitated her substance use and learned coping skills that could help prevent relapse. She emerged with practical skills and a renewed sense of purpose. "It wasn't just about staying out of trouble; it was about healing and believing in myself again."

The program's peer connections also became a source of strength, as Carole found solidarity with other women who understood her struggles. "There was something powerful about knowing that I wasn't the only one carrying this weight."

CCA's program not only supported Carole's immediate recovery but also instilled the confidence and resilience that continue to fuel her success today. By the time she graduated, she had developed the skills, emotional strength, and stability needed to sustain her recovery and pursue higher education and advocacy work. Carole earned her Bachelor of Arts and Master's Degrees in Forensic Psychology from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the years after she completed CCA's program. Since then, she has returned to the college to teach anthropology, sharing her knowledge and experiences with the next generation.

"The program didn't just change my life—it gave me the tools to create a new one."

Today, Carole sits on the Board of Directors at CCA, serves as co-chair of Women on the Rise Telling Her Story (WORTH), and is a coordinator for the Exodus Prison Project at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Widely recognized as a grassroots leader in the movement to end the shackling of incarcerated women during childbirth and the termination of their parental rights, Carole continues to champion justice for women impacted by the criminal legal system. Her accomplishments have been celebrated with numerous awards, including John Jay College's Howard D. Mann Award for Humanitarianism in Service (2006) and the Coalition for Women Prisoners' Advocacy Award (2007). Moreover, Carole's voice has extended far beyond her immediate community. Her writings have been featured in several publications nationwide, and she has delivered presentations at major conferences held by organizations such as the Drug Policy Alliance and the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective.

Carole is not just a survivor, she is also a leader, and the long-term support and transformative tools provided by CCA remain the foundation of her continued success. As a mentor, she guides women walking the same path she once took, offering empathy, encouragement, and support.

"I know what it's like to feel invisible, and I'm going to make sure that no one else has to feel that way. This program gave me back my voice. Now I can use it to make sure others aren't silenced."



CONCLUSION: NYC'S PATH FORWARD

Each year, the City spends billions of dollars to detain people, largely Black and brown, in conditions that are so egregious as to warrant the federal government to step in. On top of the inhumanity and exorbitant costs of the current system, it simply is not working for anyone: It is not working for individuals who regularly cycle in and out of jail; it is not working for families who lose mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers to Rikers; and it is certainly not working as a system of public safety.

Unquestionably, it is time for a paradigm shift—one that centers a more humane, holistic approach and prioritizes creating the conditions so all communities across the City can thrive. For far too long, Rikers has been used to try to mask the consequences of decades of community disinvestment and uneven development that have made New York one of the most inequitable cities in the nation. The failure is palpable as disparities increase and marginalized community members become further disenfranchised.

Conversely, ATIs help address peoples' specific needs and give participants the opportunity to break pervasive cycles of poverty, trauma, and harm. We must re- envision the current system and make ATIs the default for most criminal legal system involvement. By meeting individuals where they are and offering tailored interventions ranging from job training to family therapy to educational support to mental health and/or substance use treatment, ATIs empower participants to succeed and meaningfully contribute to our shared communities. Investing in these programs is a clear way for New York City to effectively eradicate the scourge of Rikers and create communities that are better resourced and more equitable—all while reducing crime, enhancing public safety, and saving billions of dollars.

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