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NYC Public Defenders & Advocates Testify Before New York Senate on World Mental Health Day to Urge Passage of Treatment Court Expansion Act (TCEA)

(NEW YORK, NY) - On World Mental Health Day, Friday, October 10, 2025, state elected officials, people directly impacted by the criminal legal system, public defenders, and community advocates gathered outside the NYS Senate Offices for a press conference prior to testifying before the New York Senate in support of the Treatment Court Expansion Act (TCEA) ([S.4547/A.4869](#)). This legislation would stop the revolving door of incarceration and homelessness for people with mental health and substance use disorders by diverting them to the services that address root causes.

The state's reliance on incarceration as a default mental health response has been a humanitarian, public safety, and fiscal policy disaster. Incarceration is inherently traumatizing and destabilizing, leaving those exposed to it even more likely to be rearrested. Meanwhile, the rate of individuals with mental illness in New York's correctional facilities is surging, with suicide rates in New York state prisons [more than doubling](#) over the past year.

TCEA offers a powerful alternative. This legislation would ensure that thousands of New Yorkers grappling with mental health issues are met with treatment and dignity instead of decompensating in a correctional setting, ultimately resulting in a healthier and safer New York for everyone. Treatment Courts, which this legislation seeks to expand and modernize through this legislation, are proven to reduce recidivism rates by [50%](#). These policies also promise to save the state millions of taxpayer dollars, at an especially fiscally precarious time. [Estimates](#) suggest that for every \$1 spent on treatment court, the state sees \$2.21 in benefits, which increases to \$10 when [collateral](#) consequences, like childcare and housing, are included.

TCEA offers cascading benefits, coming to the aid of New Yorkers in crisis, and making all of our communities safer and healthier in the long run.

Speakers at the press conference:

- Senator Jessica Ramos
- Assemblymember Phara Souffrant Forrest
- Senator Nathalia Fernandez
- Stanley Richards (Fortune Society)

- Tina Luongo (Legal Aid Society)
- Shirley Ng (AALDEF)

Following the press conference, coalition members testified before the New York Senate, urging lawmakers to prioritize mental health care and treatment over a sentence of incarceration.

“There’s no better day to advocate for the Treatment Court Expansion than on World Mental Health Day. It’s auspicious that today community stakeholders, elected officials, legal scholars, and individuals formerly incarcerated convened to build a more equitable justice system,” said **New York State Senator Jessica Ramos**. “TCEA will bring rehabilitation to the courtroom and our streets, help us reduce rates of recidivism, and improve our public safety holistically. Today’s hearing is progress on our journey to law enactment.”

“On World Mental Health Day, we’re reminded that true public safety comes from meeting people’s needs, not locking them away to get worse,” said **New York State Assembly Member Phara Souffrant Forrest**. “As a maternal health nurse, a mother, and a legislator, I know that care is what keeps communities safe and whole. The Treatment Court Expansion Act recognizes that people in crisis deserve treatment, not incarceration. When we invest in healing over punishment, we reduce recidivism, support families, and build safer neighborhoods. This is a common-sense, evidence-based solution to a crisis that has gone on far too long. I’m proud to stand with advocates, public defenders, mental health professionals, and directly impacted New Yorkers to say: we need the legislature to take action this session. We need the Treatment Court Expansion Act.”

“The Treatment Court Expansion Act recognizes that incarceration is not treatment. When we meet people with treatment instead of punishment, we see lower recidivism, stronger families, and safer communities,” said **New York State Senator Nathalia Fernandez, Chair, Alcoholism And Substance Use Disorders Committee**. “This is a compassionate and data-driven approach to justice that places healing at the center of public safety. This legislation ensures that every county has access to a diversion court equipped to address mental health conditions and substance use disorders through trauma-informed, evidence-based care.”

“In Manhattan, people in crisis are forced to navigate a maze of diversion programs controlled by the District Attorney’s Office that delay treatment and leave many people stalled by systemic barriers often from behind the walls of Rikers Island,” said **Stan Germán, Executive Director of New York County Defender Services**. “Every day we see New Yorkers who are left waiting instead of healing. The Treatment Court Expansion Act will finally bring fairness, efficiency, and humanity to a system that should have always been focused on treatment.”

“Locking up people who need mental health treatment is, and will never be, the solution — especially as we continue to witness the inhumane conditions and mistreatment faced by individuals caught in the ongoing crisis at Rikers Island and across New York State prisons,” said **Tina Luongo, Chief Attorney of the Criminal Defense Practice at The Legal Aid Society**. “The Treatment Court Expansion Act presents a long-overdue, life-saving alternative by creating a path to treatment for thousands of people in jail living with mental health conditions, developmental disabilities, and substance use disorders. Grounded in harm reduction and guided by clinically trained professionals, this legislation offers a compassionate, evidence-based approach that centers healing, public health, and community safety. As soon as session reconvenes next year, Governor Hochul, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie must enact this critical legislation.”

“Far too many vulnerable New Yorkers are trapped in the revolving door between the criminal legal system, shelters, the streets, and emergency rooms,” said **Stanley Richards, President and CEO of The Fortune Society**. “Over half of the people in our New York city jails have a mental health diagnosis, and over twenty percent have a serious mental illness. Those statistics represent a breakdown in our collective systems to resource and provide effective off-ramps to treatment. The Treatment Court Expansion Act would be one such off-ramp, and its passage is long overdue. The Fortune Society is proud to stand with our partners today in

urging our legislators to pass this critical bill.”

“Even though it is recognized as World Mental Health Day, mental illness is extremely personal, as it was during my struggles and ultimate recovery,” said **Ibrahim Ayu, Manhattan Mental Health Court Graduate and Justice Reform Advocate**. “We have to recognize mental illness as equally important and personal as physical illness and injury. The same care we afford hospital patients should be extended for mental health sufferers. And our laws should reflect that truth.”

“During the pandemic, working with individuals subjected to hate violence and harassment so clearly revealed the limits of the criminal system to bring lasting solutions or accountability to victims,” said **Jane Shim, Director of the Anti-Asian Violence program at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund**. “The Treatment Court Expansion Act answers a simple question: what would happen if, instead of reacting to harm that has already been done, we tried to prevent future harm from ever happening at all? Mental Health Courts are one piece of a broader approach that will help meet people's basic needs and make our communities safer and healthier.”

“Every day, we represent Bronx community members whose contact with the criminal legal system is driven by untreated mental health needs, substance use disorders, and trauma,” said **Eli Northrup, Policy Director for the Criminal Defense Practice at The Bronx Defenders**. “The Treatment Court Expansion Act offers a real opportunity to break harmful cycles of incarceration by investing in health-based, holistic interventions rather than punishment. This legislation offers an effective and compassionate alternative to a system which has perpetuated inequities without making us any safer.”

More information about the Treatment Court Expansion Act at treatmentnotjail.com.

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