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### **NEW TEXT MESSAGE REMINDERS FOR SUMMONS RECIPIENTS IMPROVES ATTENDANCE IN COURT AND DRAMATICALLY CUTS WARRANTS**

*New York City partnered with behavioral economics firm ideas42 and the University of Chicago Crime Lab to test simple “nudges” to get people to court; text reminders improved appearance rates, resulting in thousands fewer arrest warrants*

**NEW YORK**—Mayor de Blasio today announced the City’s text-reminder program for people who receive summonses – launched by the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, the Office of Court Administration and NYPD – has been successful in encouraging individuals to appear when they have upcoming court dates. The text reminders been shown to cut failure-to-appear rates by 26 percent, potentially preventing thousands of warrants each year. When paired with a redesigned summons form, the text reminders decreased rates of failure-to-appear in court by 36 percent.

“Little reminders can make a big difference, and these text messages will help people avoid a missed court appearance – and a warrant that could eventually lead to spending a night in jail. We’ve found that these gentle nudges help New Yorkers remember when and where their court appearance is and reduce failure-to-appear rates, and that progress is a great step toward a fairer justice system,” said **Mayor Bill de Blasio**.

“The Criminal Justice Reform Act has drastically reduced the number of criminal summonses issued, but those who do receive criminal summonses face an arrest warrant for skipping a court date,” said **Council Speaker Corey Johnson**. “This new text messaging service will serve as an essential tool in reminding busy New Yorkers to appear for their court date which will greatly reduce the risk for arrest. The Council has been proud to be a leader on criminal justice reform and thank MOCJ, NYPD and OCA in taking this important step towards a more just and fair system for all New Yorkers.”

In New York City in 2016 there were 267,763 criminal summonses issued, but nearly 4 of 10 people who received them failed to appear in court — whether because they forgot by the time the date came around months later, did not realize the importance of attending, or did not make time to do so for other reasons. As a result, a warrant may be issued for their arrest, which can subject them to more severe punishments as well as stretch the resources of the justice system.

Beginning in 2014, the City partnered with ideas42, a non-profit behavioral design lab, to redesign the summons form so people are more likely to return to court. The revised form more prominently displays the time, date, and location of court appearances as well as consequences for not showing up to court. A study of the effectiveness of the new form, conducted by the University of Chicago Crime Lab, revealed that it decreased the failure-to-appear rate by approximately 13 percent.

On the new form individuals are also invited to include their phone number, so they can receive text message reminders. During a sixteen-month-period (March 2016 to June 2017), people who provided phone numbers (about 11 percent of all summons recipients) were randomly selected to receive different text messages encouraging appearance. Some messages emphasized that there would be consequences for failure to appear, some encouraged planning in advance for the appearance, and some underscored that failing to appear would be out of step with the norms of their peers. For example:

- **Warning of consequences:** “Helpful reminder: go to court on Mon, Jun 3 09:30AM. We'll text to help you remember. Show up to avoid an arrest warrant. Reply STOP to end texts.”
- **Encouraging planning:** “You have court on Mon June 03 at One Centre Street Manhattan. What time should you leave to get there by 9:30AM? Any other arrangements to make? Write out your plan.”
- **Indicating social norms:** “Most people show up to clear tickets but records show you missed court for yours. Go to court at One Centre Street Manhattan.”

The most effective text messages combined information on the consequences of not showing up to court, what to expect at court, and plan-making elements. These messages cut failure-to-appear rates by 26 percent (the share who failed to appear fell from 38 percent to 28 percent). This reduction from text messaging is in addition to the 13 percent improvement already realized through the new summons form.

The Office of Court Administration is now sending text reminders to all summons recipients who gave a cell phone number on the summons, which is anticipated to prevent issuance of thousands of warrants annually.

The City has taken a number of additional steps to prevent minor offenses from snowballing into arrests and detention, which can imperil a person’s job or housing. The Criminal Justice Reform Act, effective June 13, 2017, substituted civil tickets for criminal summonses for low-level offenses like open container or littering in most instances, and has reduced criminal summonses for these offenses by more than 90 percent. In addition, the City has de-escalated summons enforcement under the de Blasio administration, which cut the number of criminal summonses by 50 percent between 2013-2017 (excluding offenses now punished with civil tickets under the CJRA). The Mayor’s Office also worked with four district attorneys to dismiss 644,000

outstanding warrants for minor offenses like drinking alcohol in public or entering a park after hours.

The text-message pilot was funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL).

For a full report on the study, visit [urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/projects/using-behavioral-science-to-improve-criminal-justice-outcomes](https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/projects/using-behavioral-science-to-improve-criminal-justice-outcomes)

**Elizabeth Glazer, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice**, said, “Small, common-sense innovations can yield major dividends: a simple text message that gets people to court will help us reduce by thousands the number of warrants issued for people who fail to appear. This reflects how the criminal justice system is rethinking its relationship with New Yorkers, scientifically testing new approaches, and engaging people so they show up in court and adhere to the law.”

**Chief Administrative Judge Lawrence Marks** said, “The New York State Court system schedules millions of appearances a year. The implementation of this text reminder system allowed us to further refine the technology involved, see positive results and look towards expanding it to other aspects of the court process. The public’s interactions with the Judiciary far outnumber those of the other two branches of government, so it becomes incumbent on us to embrace technologies that make their experience what they would expect from one of the nation’s busiest court systems.”

**Police Commissioner James P. O’Neill**, said, “Any measure that can help to expedite the disposition of summonses will add to the efficiency of the system and benefit everyone involved in the process.”

**Alissa Fishbane, Managing Director at ideas42**, said, “We’ve identified two simple, inexpensive strategies that all cities could use to help more people undertake the necessary steps to successfully appear in court. As a result, New York City will issue tens of thousands fewer failure-to-appear warrants each year, which highlights how solutions based on behavioral science insights can effectively complement existing policies and benefit all stakeholders, including the court system, law enforcement, and most importantly, the public.”

**Aurélie Ouss, a Crime Lab Affiliate at the University of Pennsylvania**, said, “While collaborations between policy-makers and behavioral economists have proven successful in several domains, this is one of the first rigorous demonstrations of how behavioral science can inform criminal justice reform. It indicates that it is possible to curb some offenses without resorting to stricter punishment, which is promising for improving the efficiency and fairness of the criminal justice system more broadly.”

“Civic innovation is the key that unlocks the solution to many of our society’s most intractable challenges, including in the realm of criminal justice. As a city, we should be open to studying and testing civic innovation across the board, just as we have in a successful pilot that connected people who have received summonses with text message reminders. This approach has proven to

improve attendance in court and prevent thousands of warrants every year, and I'm pleased to see the Office of Court Administration will utilize this method going forward," said **Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams**.

"This program developed by the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, the Office of Court Administration and the NYPD represents a small but important step towards using technology to help every day citizens interact with the Judiciary. In today's world where technology has helped to streamline so many things in our day to day life, this program will help thousands of New Yorkers avoid costly and time consuming headaches when they otherwise may have failed to appear. I look forward to our courts further embracing technology in order to help our constituents navigate the country's busiest courts," said **Assembly Member Jeffrey Dinowitz, Chairman of the Assembly Judiciary Committee**.

"With the court system clogged with all that goes into dealing with these summonses, as well as the impact on the lives of those who needlessly may wind up with warrants, this is both a smart and sensible step. Great idea!" said **Assembly Member Luis Sepulveda**.

"Using text message reminders to get people to court is a common sense way we can help people ensure that minor offenses do not grow into something larger" said **Assembly Member David Weprin, Chairman of the Corrections Committee**. "I am glad to see that this city is taking steps day after day to bring us closer to a fairer and more just system."

"I applaud the administration for taking this important step to resolve summonses and reduce the number of warrants issued each year. Our pilot program proves that the text-reminder program is an effective tool to reduce court appearance delinquency and ensure that low level offenses are addressed fairly and expediently," said **Council Member Vanessa Gibson**. "I applaud Mayor de Blasio and Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice Director Elizabeth Glazer for their commitment to finding innovative public safety solutions and for their efforts to make sure New York can be a more fair and just city for all."

"Improving court attendance of summons recipients will go a long way towards curtailing unnecessary arrest warrants and expensive incarceration. As it stands today, New York City's exorbitant failure-to-appear rate clogs our justice system and wastes valuable taxpayer resources. I commend the City and the Office of Court Administration for focusing on the failure-to-appear problem and taking action to ensure summons recipients have all the necessary information at their fingertips, said **Council Member Rory I. Lancman**.

"Needless warrants have resulted in hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers winding up behind bars for the smallest of infractions. This simple but effective policy will help change that," said **Council Member Brad Lander**. "Along with the City Council's Criminal Justice Reform Act, the Administration's supervised release program, and alternatives-to-incarceration, we are working step-by-step to end mass incarceration and speed the day when we can Close Rikers."

"As Chair of the Criminal Justice Committee, I see this as a significant step forward in both modernizing the system and providing greater transparency. With up to 36% reduction in no-shows, text message reminders avoid unnecessary warrants and paperwork, which make the

process easier across the board and ensures people are better informed. I applaud the City for investing in this technology," said **Council Member Keith Powers**.

"Last year, we passed the criminal justice reform act with the goal of limiting the number of court summonses, which can become more serious offenses, with more lasting impact, if court dates are missed. That act has drastically reduced summonses, but the issue of missed court dates turning small offenses into life altering warrants remains," said **Council Member Jumaane D. Williams**. "Text reminders are a simple, effective way to address that reality. I thank the administration for implementing this measure, which will help prevent lowest level offenders from becoming more deeply entrenched within our extremely flawed system of criminal justice."

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