



OFFICE OF THE BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT

ANTONIO REYNOSO

Brooklyn Borough President

June 1, 2023

Dear Speaker Adams,

Final FY 2024 budget negotiations come at a challenging time for our city. The continuing arrival of thousands of asylum seekers puts a strain on our resources, yet we must not shirk our responsibility to provide safe and dignified shelter for all. As we continue to recover from the hardships of the pandemic, now is not the time to cut essential services for our communities. The resources are there; the question is how we prioritize them. Instead of continuing to allow inflated budgets for policing and incarcerating New Yorkers, we must instead use our resources to deliver on the values of sanctuary and care that represent who we are.

The following represent priorities that I am asking you and the City Council to support as negotiations enter their final days. Many of these echo priorities that the Council has already expressed, and I want to thank you for your ongoing leadership and partnership.

Support asylum seekers and house the unhoused: I recently released [a policy proposal](#) that would help address the ongoing influx of asylum seekers by compelling the private sector to contribute. The crisis of asylum seekers is deeply connected to the existing homelessness crisis in our city, and the end goal for both should always be to provide safe, permanent, affordable housing, starting with those who have been in the NYC shelter system the longest, and thus freeing up space for new arrivals. Several budget strategies can help us achieve this:

- **Fully fund the Human Resources Administration to provide housing assistance to voucher holders.** While I was pleased to see that the Executive Budget baselines increased funding for the Commission on Human Rights to enforce voucher discrimination claims, HRA's Homeless Prevention Unit faces significant cuts at a time when their work is most needed. I commend the Council for expanding eligibility for rental assistance vouchers, yet those who hold those vouchers need HRA staff to assist them with finding housing opportunities. City Council should also ensure that HRA has adequate staff to process benefits generally, as agency staffing has not kept up with dramatically increased demand for assistance since 2021.
- **Increase capital funding for HPD and NYCHA and restore the Vacant Unit Readiness Program.** I commend the Council for supporting increased investments in affordable and public housing and encourage you to continue fighting for the \$2.5 billion for NYCHA and \$3.3 billion for HPD in capital funding still missing from the Executive Budget. I also support the Council's call for \$31 million to restore NYCHA's Vacant Unit Readiness

Program to pre-November-PEG levels. It is unacceptable that more than 3,500 public housing units are sitting empty as we struggle to find space to accommodate the unhoused in our city.

- **Fund supportive housing & end the jail-to-shelter pipeline:** In a time when supportive housing is desperately needed, gutting supportive housing rental assistance is not the answer. Advocates estimate that approximately 2,500 people in DOC custody each year could be served by supportive housing, thus saving the City \$1.2 billion annually. I support the Council's call for \$57.8 million to fund Justice Involved Supportive Housing and the 15/15 program, and encourage the Council to call for an additional \$50 million to create 700 units of Rapid Reentry Housing for those released at arraignment. These investments would connect those with behavioral health challenges to permanent housing rather than relying on the shelter system or the street, contribute to decarceration efforts, and help end the jail-to-shelter pipeline.

Additionally, we must support asylum seekers by providing:

- **New Legal Services Funding:** I join with advocates who are working on the ground with newly arrived asylum seekers in their call for an investment of \$70 million: \$10 million to build capacity within the organizations providing assistance with asylum, TPS, and work authorization applications, and \$60 million to fund legal representation to address the approximately 127,000 legal cases pending in immigration court.
- **Continuation and Expansion of Promise NYC:** The Executive Budget completely cuts funding for this program, which extends public childcare subsidies to undocumented children. An investment of \$20 million could meet the growing need and expand the timeline of this program beyond its first six months.

Rightsize the DOC budget and Continue Efforts to Close Rikers: Thank you for your staunch support of closing the Rikers Island jail, which as you are well aware is a humanitarian crisis. We must continue our efforts to decarcerate in order to meet the 2027 closing deadline. As we work toward this goal, we must also address the out-of-control spending within the Department of Corrections. I was pleased to see a projected reduction in overtime spending for the agency in the Executive Budget, as their inflated overtime costs have been egregious, particularly due to abuse of sick leave and reassignment of non-jail duties. Yet DOC's staffing ratio continues to hover near one officer for every incarcerated person, far exceeding the national average, and there is room to dramatically reduce headcount by eliminating vacancies and ending the employment of chronically absent officers. Advocates project that bringing the headcount down to a reasonable 5,860 total could save the City over \$330 million, which could then be re-allocated to programs such as:

- Supportive housing programs as mentioned above;
- Increased investment in healthcare and behavioral health programs such as new crisis respite centers and expansion of community treatment teams;
- Expanded Alternatives to Incarceration programs, particularly a \$28 million investment in Supervised Release; and
- Other social and workforce development programs for youth.

Given these opportunities readily available to reduce agency costs, it is offensive that DOC has proposed cutting \$17 million for contractors who provide programming. The agency could save \$17 million by cutting just 61 vacancies, and yet proposes to end programs that provide skills development and job training, mental health treatment, financial literacy, and other programs that are shown to reduce recidivism. The Council must fight back against this egregious proposal.

Restore and expand education funding: With significant learning loss and high staff attrition due to the pandemic, now is the worst possible time to cut funding to education programs. I stand with my colleagues in calling on this administration to invest \$388.1 million in additional education opportunities, and want to express my support for the Council's proposals regarding:

- **3K Funding & Pay Parity:** I support the Council's call for a \$15 million pilot program to convert 1,000 existing school day/school year 3K seats to extended day/full year. I would additionally like to see funding dedicated to an outreach team to increase awareness of opportunities for 3K citywide. I was also disappointed not to see the projected \$46 million in additional funding needed to address pay parity for 3K and early childhood education providers included in the Executive Budget despite the State's recommitment to increasing wages, and encourage the Council to continue fighting for this funding.
- **Restorative Justice & Social and Emotional Learning Resources:** I support the Council's push for \$59 million in restorative justice coordinators and community trainings to help end the school-to-prison pipeline. As we see an uptick of incidents across schools due to mental health challenges, I also echo the Council's advocacy for an investment of \$14.1 million for more social workers and guidance counselors for 100 new schools.
- **Community Schools:** Community Schools have become essential to Brooklyn neighborhoods, with a variety of services offered on-site to students and their families. I support the Council's call to baseline \$15 million for these programs.
- **School-based mental health clinics:** These provide one-site mental health services, diagnoses, and treatments for school children, who may not otherwise have access to these services. I support the Council's call for \$28 million to fund 100 additional clinics, which will increase access and enable DOE to meet the recommended ratio of one social worker for every 250 students.
- **School Upgrades & Enhancements:** As DOE prepares to comply with the new class size law, we must review our schools' capital needs. I support the Council's ask for \$400 million to enhance energy efficiency, and hope that the administration will consider the Council's recommendations to add an additional \$200 million in school kitchen and cafeteria improvements and \$2.25 million for playground expansions.

Fully fund Summer Rising & SYEP: The recent news that 45,000 applicants to the Summer Rising program did not receive spots this year is concerning. I encourage the Council to advocate for an expansion of funding to meet the need so that next year, all applicants can participate in the program. I also support the Council's call to baseline \$11 million for Metrocards for the over 10,000 students who participate in the Summer Youth Employment Program.

Support CUNY: In May, Comptroller Lander released a [report](#) outlining how devastating proposed budget cuts of \$41.3 million/year between FY24-FY26 would be to CUNY's ability to provide quality education. While I am happy to see a commitment of \$1 million to Medgar Evers

College Brooklyn Recovery Corps, I strongly encourage the City Council to continue fighting back against these proposed cuts, while supporting important programs such as the Accelerate, Complete and Engage Program (ACE), and academic advisors.

Oppose cuts to Adult Literacy initiatives: The Executive Budget proposes a \$15.3 million cut to adult literacy programs, which advocates say would impact their ability to deliver these services over the next five years. I encourage the Council to push back against these proposed cuts, and I support the Council's ask for baselined funding to bring the per student funded rate to \$2,700.

Restore contracts for CBOs working on asthma and COPD: I support the Council's ask to restore \$1 million to CBOs that have been a critical resource to New Yorkers through the Asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) Community Health Worker (CHW) program, which reduces avoidable, asthma-related hospitalizations. Using in-house generalist CHWs through the Public Health Corps will likely reduce the impact that localized CBOs with trained personnel can have and discourage patients from seeking care, especially those from the highest-impacted Black and Brown communities that are most comfortable seeking support through CBOs.

Fund hiring of reproductive health psychologists for every H+H facility: In NYC, Black mothers are dying at a rate 9.4 times higher than their white counterparts, while Brooklyn faces the highest rate of maternal mortality across the five boroughs. I was pleased to see \$1.9 million baselined in the Executive Budget in the outyears for maternal mental health services through DOHMH. Mental health is the largest contributor to maternal deaths during the "fourth trimester," but 84% of these deaths are preventable. I support the Council's recommendation to add \$2.4 million to support the hiring of a reproductive health psychologist for every H+H hospital. I am extremely disappointed that this was not included in the Executive Budget.

Ensure Pay Parity for Nurses: We must increase wages for our current nurses and fill the 2,000 vacancies in the H+H system. It has been nearly two years since New York's Nurse Staffing Law passed, but implementation has been disheartening and our hospitals are still operating at unsafe staffing ratios, which are related to increases in hospital mortality. At the heels of private sector nurses winning historic agreements that enhanced safe staffing ratios and raised their pay by 19.9% this past January, we owe our public sector nurses the same, or the pay gap between public and private sectors will continue to grow. PEGs cannot include a cut for frontline nurses. By offering fair wages, we can build healthier staffing ratios and improve retention; this has the potential of saving costs for recruitment and training, which together can cost \$82,000 to \$88,000 per new hire. It reduces the need to resort to costly staffing agencies that cost an average of \$120/hour for traveling nurses and which require additional hiring agency vendor costs. In calendar year 2022, H+H spent \$594 million on traveling nurses, costs that could be allocated towards fair wages. We need an investment into our nursing workforce to ensure we keep this important workforce within our public hospital system.

Increase funding for Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities: MOPD has been critical in offering comprehensive care and accessibility to New Yorkers with disabilities through programs like NYC:ATWORK. I support the Council's ask for a \$2.5M investment in the NYC:ATWORK program to connect people with disabilities to equitable career opportunities.

Increase funding for legal service providers to strengthen Right-to-Counsel: Legal service providers are facing a staffing crisis that is undermining the law that mandates that all eligible New Yorkers receive free counsel in Housing Court. Data shows that the vast majority of landlords have legal representation, while reporting from 2022 showed that less than 10% of tenants actually received the counsel to which they were entitled. I join advocates' call for \$200 million to be baselined for legal service providers to hire and retain attorneys to help address this ongoing disparity.

Fully fund our libraries: While the administration's recent rollback of planned cuts to the City's libraries is a positive outcome, I am concerned that this news has overshadowed the fact that libraries still face \$36.2 million in budget cuts. The CEO of the Brooklyn Public Library has said that these cuts would mean, "agonizing choices about shortening hours, cutting programs and collections, and rolling back services." I encourage the Council to continue to push back against these cuts and maintain the essential services our libraries provide.

Restore the Small Business Resource Network: The FY24 budget currently includes no funding for this program, developed during the pandemic to connect Business Support Specialists to small businesses through the five borough chambers of commerce. These specialists help small businesses owners address challenges and have supported almost 12,000 businesses since 2020. \$3.5 million would fully restore this program's funding.

Ensure food access for older adults: Yet another egregious example of unnecessary budget cuts comes at the expense of our older adults. The Executive Budget calls for cuts to both home-delivered and Older Adult Center meals, claiming that participation in both programs is down. However, the latest MMR shows that more than twice as many meals have been served to older adults through these programs this year versus last year. I commend the Council for opposing these cuts and for advocating to increase funding for outreach and marketing to encourage older adults to return to the OACs now that the risk of COVID-19 is decreased.

Help sustain our cultural organizations: One of my main priorities as Borough President is to help our borough's public-serving non-profit organizations find permanent homes. Being at the mercy of a private landlord in our competitive real estate market can make long-term planning difficult. These groups should be focusing on their work, not worrying about losing their space. That is why it is extremely disappointing that DCLA does not facilitate property acquisition with its capital dollars. My understanding of the reason for this is that DCLA does not have the staffing resources it needs to manage complicated acquisition processes. I have substantial capital resources to allocate to Brooklyn, and I want to use it to help groups find permanent spaces. I find it extremely frustrating that I cannot extend this resource to cultural organizations due to this unnecessary limitation. I encourage the Council and administration to work together to address this in FY24.

Support community composting: Thank you for your support of mandatory curbside organics collection. With Intro 244 set to pass imminently, all New Yorkers will finally have access to this program and the City will make significant progress toward sending zero waste to landfills. As this program rolls out, DSNY proposes cutting community composting programs dramatically over the

next four years. Yet these programs are not redundant with curbside collection, but in fact enhance it with educational opportunities such as youth and school programs, Master Composter training courses, technical assistance for community gardeners, and more. The impacted groups have noted that the proposed cuts will result in dramatically reduced staffing and programming across the city, and I encourage the Council to fight back and retain these important educational opportunities.

Implement Commercial Waste Zones: A zoned system for commercial waste will improve public health, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, protect workers, and make our streets safer. I am very disappointed that DSNY is postponing implementation until the end of next year, with full rollout expected to take at least two years after that, meaning full implementation will not happen until at least seven years after we passed this bill in 2019. Last term, the City Council passed a budget that provided DSNY with funding for 38 staff specifically dedicated to CWZ, as well as funding for outreach and marketing. Yet at the preliminary budget hearing, Commissioner Tisch testified that the program is “fully funded based on need” with 20 civilian staff (three of whom had yet to be hired) and 10 uniformed staff, with outreach not slated to begin until Q3 of 2024. I disagree with the Commissioner’s assessment that it would be “premature” to start outreach now. With full staffing dedicated solely to the program, we could begin outreach now, speed up the RFP review process, and begin implementation sooner. I appreciate the Council’s continued partnership on this transformative undertaking.

Support community boards: During this year’s budget hearings, I was once again disappointed that community board budgets were not included. I provided testimony during the preliminary budget hearing, which you can refer to for more details on how I believe we can work together to better support the city’s 59 boards. In short, they need increased budgets for staffing, technology, communications, meeting space, and technical assistance regarding land use. I hope the Council will engage meaningfully by adding community boards to next year’s Governmental Operations Committee’s budget hearing agendas.

Thank you again for your leadership on these important proposals. Please don’t hesitate to reach out as budget negotiations continue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Antonio Reynoso', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Antonio Reynoso
Brooklyn Borough President