

May 17, 2023

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*****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*****

Ahead of Public Safety Budget Hearing, NYC's Public Defenders, Parental Defense Providers Call for Increased Funding to Meet the Needs of Low-Income New Yorkers

(NEW YORK, NY) – New York City's public defender organizations and local parental defense providers, ahead of the City Council's Committee on Public Safety Executive [Budget hearing](#) with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ), called for increased funding in the City's Fiscal Year 2024 budget to ensure that justice-involved low-income New Yorkers continue to have access to zealous legal representation.

Not only have chronic underfunding and contracting issues led to widespread attrition, but if unaddressed this year, New Yorkers will be further marginalized and disconnected from critical and life-saving services, reinforcing bias in the legal system and eroding public safety.

In addition to funding, New York City's public defenders and parental defense providers are demanding the City fix the overall contracting process. Through late contract registration, payment delays, and failed cost-of-living adjustments, the City has hindered these organizations from addressing attrition rates, meet their legal obligations through discovery reform, and invest in new technologies or systems upgrades that have made continuity of high-quality representation extremely difficult to maintain.

Criminal Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request - \$125 Million in Increased Funding

New York's leading public defenders - The Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn Defender Services, The Bronx Defenders, Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem, New York County Defender Services, and the Queens Defenders - are requesting [\\$125 million](#) from the City for Fiscal Year 2024 to:

- increase salaries to properly compensate staff for their critical work, allow people to meet their living expenses without being forced to work [multiple jobs](#), and combat ongoing attrition, which you have cited as an issue that needs a "[major investment](#)" to address, so that cases are not transferred from one attorney to another, which is contributing to court delay;
- meet existing discovery needs, including hiring additional staff and technology improvements to collect, store, organize and share the evidence on cases;
- increase in funding to hire more staff to handle the rise in homicide cases;
- Provide additional funding to cover fixed cost increases such as health care, rent, and OTPS.

Parental Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request - \$48 Million in Increased Funding

New York's parental defense legal providers - Brooklyn Defender Services, The Bronx Defenders, Center for Family Representation, and Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem - are requesting an additional \$48 million in the FY24 budget for lawyers for parents.

This money will:

- ensure workload meets statewide standards and is reasonable for attorneys and other essential staff;
- fund salary increases for staff to address unprecedented attrition, reduce transfers which interrupt representation and contribute to court backlogs, and attract prospective hires; combat ongoing attrition;
- Provide additional funding to cover fixed cost increases such as health care, rent, and OTPS

Overhauling the City's Fraught Contracting and Payment Process

In addition to funding, the City must overhaul the contracting and payment process. The instability and insecurity that comes from very late contract registration, payments delayed months or years, and lack of regular cost of living increases hinders the ability of criminal, civil, and parent defense providers to retain and attract staff, maintain suitable workspace, invest in technology infrastructure and ensure the continuity of these consequential legal services. This is an issue that both you and Comptroller Brad Lander have [recognized](#) as a high priority.

While the reforms needed are wide-ranging, some examples include - The City must establish new protocols that increase the contract advance to more than 25 percent as necessary, rather than forcing these organizations to front costs with resources not available.

The City must also revise its policy of not allowing nonprofits to use their budget to pay for the interest payments on bank loans caused solely by the City's delay.

“Public defender organizations are in crisis, hemorrhaging staff due to years of stagnant funding that jeopardizes our ability to continue to ensure zealous legal representation for justice-involved New Yorkers,” said **Tina Luongo, chief attorney of the Criminal Defense Practice at The Legal Aid Society**. “A budget is a reflection of values, and if the City values public defenders’ constitutionally mandated role in the criminal legal system, the FY2024 budget must include increased funding for our organizations.”

“Parental defense providers like the Center for Family Representation (CFR) work with some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers,” said **Tehra Coles, Executive Director of the Center for Family Representation (CFR)**. “A lack of appropriate funding hinders our ability to provide critical representation for indigent parents and families, many of whom are Black and Brown. CFR attorneys are not being paid according to ILS caseload standards, leaving them overburdened with higher caseloads than recommended. Every parent deserves high-quality interdisciplinary representation while navigating a highly complex and racially-biased legal system — and to provide these services, family defense organizations need to be properly funded.”

“Public defense organizations strive to provide the citizens of New York with free, high-quality legal representation in the face of inadequate funding and chronic underinvestment,” said **Lori Zeno, Executive Director of Queens Defenders**. “Today we are at a breaking point – persistent lack of financial support has resulted in staggering caseloads and high turnover rates of veteran staff members, which severely undermines our capacity to provide diligent and effective representation. This disparity perpetuates systemic racial and socioeconomic inequalities and erodes public trust in the legal system. We call on public officials to stand up for the rights of our city’s most marginalized citizens and provide increased funding for public defense providers in the 2024 budget.”

“If our lawmakers are serious about public safety then it’s time for them to get serious about funding public defense,” said **Alice Fontier, Managing Director of Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem**. “Public defenders represent – and are a part of – communities that have shouldered the burden of systemic racism and chronic underinvestment for decades. Our communities deserve, and are entitled to an investment in public defense, and our staff deserve to be paid for their commitment and expertise.”

“Every day, New Yorkers are threatened with family separation, incarceration, and other serious harms in the legal system, and public defenders are there to face those threats with zealous advocacy and defense, upholding people’s rights, freedom, and dignity. But when the city government underfunds and undervalues these critical mandated legal services, the people we represent suffer,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**. “New York City must show that it values the rights and lives of New Yorkers ensnared in these systems and increase funding for family and criminal defense in this year’s budget.”

“When public defenders are underfunded, it doesn’t just undermine our mandate to provide legal and support services, but the legal rights of every New Yorker,” said **Justine Olderman, Executive Director of The Bronx Defenders**. “Every day, thousands of New Yorkers are threatened with incarceration, deportation, family separation, and eviction. But by refusing to fund public defenders properly and on time, the City is effectively turning its back on the most marginalized New Yorkers. The City must stop putting policing, surveillance, and incarceration ahead of increased funding in services that will allow New Yorkers to survive and thrive.”

Background

As the cost of living in New York City continues to rise, thousands more New Yorkers will be threatened by eviction, job loss, food insecurity, incarceration, family separation, and deportation. New York City’s leading public defender organizations and family defense providers are often the first line of defense for New Yorkers struggling to survive.

Yet, these organizations have faced years of chronic underfunding, contracting issues, and unfulfilled commitments to provide pay parity and supplements to meet the demands of historic legislative reforms, such as discovery. These failures have led to widespread staff vacancies and delayed investments in critical infrastructure, like technology.

The City’s contract process has also compounded these issues. Through late contract registration, payment delays, and failed cost-of-living adjustments, the City has hindered public defenders from addressing attrition rates, meet their legal obligations through discovery reform, and invest in new technologies or systems upgrades that have made continuity of high-quality representation extremely difficult to maintain.

Ultimately, if left unaddressed this year, not only will staff attrition levels continue to rise, but low-income New Yorkers will be further marginalized and disconnected from the critical services these organizations provide to keep them in their homes, with their families, and in their communities; services that ensure true community safety.

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