

April 14, 2026

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Vote in NYC Jails Coalition Rally at City Hall Ahead of City Council Hearing on Voting Access in NYC Jails

Coalition Demands Equal Ballot Access and Stronger Voting Systems for Incarcerated New Yorkers

(CITY HALL) — The Vote in NYC Jails Coalition, alongside public defenders, elected officials, advocates, community leaders, and directly impacted New Yorkers, held a rally on the steps of City Hall ahead of a [City Council hearing](#) on voting access for people incarcerated in New York City jails. Despite clear legal protections for voting eligibility, many people detained in New York City jails continue to face significant barriers to casting a ballot. Coalition members and advocates have long raised concerns that the current absentee ballot system is insufficient to ensure equal access to the ballot for people held in custody.

Advocates argue that stronger systems and clearer processes are necessary to guarantee that eligible voters in city jails are able to register, request ballots, and cast votes that are counted. The City Council hearing provided an opportunity for lawmakers to examine existing challenges and consider solutions that ensure voting access for incarcerated New Yorkers.

“Far too many people held in New York City jails — despite being legally eligible — are effectively denied their right to vote because of systemic barriers and inadequate processes,” said **Rigodis Appling, Staff Attorney with The Legal Aid Society’s Special Litigation Unit & Community Justice Unit**. “Voting is a fundamental right, not a privilege contingent on circumstance. The current absentee ballot system has consistently failed to ensure meaningful access for incarcerated New Yorkers. We urge City leaders to implement durable solutions, including the establishment of polling sites in jails, to guarantee that every eligible voter can fully participate in our democracy.”

“Despite thousands being eligible to vote at Rikers, the data shows a system that consistently blocks participation,” said **Robert Willis, Justice Advocate Coordinator at LatinoJustice PRLDEF**. “Having witnessed ballots discarded firsthand, it’s clear this is not incidental failure, but systemic neglect. LatinoJustice will continue to work to ensure the right to vote is accessible for every eligible New Yorker.”

“New York City prides itself on being a leader in democracy and equal justice, yet thousands of eligible voters in our jails remain effectively shut out of the democratic process each election cycle. In 2024, more than 5,000 eligible voters on Rikers Island were denied a ballot — not because they lacked the right to vote, but because the systems in place failed them,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director, Brooklyn Defender Services**. “We urge the City Council to direct the Department of Correction and Board of Elections to establish polling sites at Rikers Island and overhaul the policies and systems that have denied our communities equal access to the ballot for far too long.”

“The League is here today, with our Coalition partners, to bring to the forefront priority issues of accessing the vote at Rikers. The people detained at Rikers have a uniquely large and dramatic stake in how this city is governed. They are more directly affected by decisions made about courts, public defense, housing, health care,

policing, and pay equity than almost any other single population. The vast majority of people detained there are pretrial and retain their full right to vote. They are not outside our democracy. They are part of it,” said **Kai Rosenthal, Co-President of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York**. “The most effective way to protect voting rights at Rikers is a polling site.”

“Every eligible New Yorker should have full access to exercise their right to vote,” said **Darren Mack, Co-Director at Freedom Agenda**. “Shamefully, accessibility for incarcerated people has been riddled with obstacles in the previous administration. A polling site on Rikers Island would facilitate the protection of this basic right for people in the Department of Correction custody, and staff would benefit as well. DOC and the Board of Elections should immediately work together to usher in a new era in our city.”

“Almost all the New Yorkers locked up on Rikers are presumed innocent and have a legal right to vote. But they have been effectively disenfranchised because of the negligence and incompetence of the responsible government agencies. We call on the powers that be in our great city led by our our new mayor, Zohran Mamdani, to make sure that the Department of Correction and the Board of Election take all practical steps needed to provide voting access for our fellow citizens who are confined in NYC's jails,” said **Robert Gangi, Director of Police Reform Organizing Project**.

“The right to vote as well as having full access to the ballot box should not end at the gates to Rikers Island. Unfortunately, that full and complete access does not apply to the detainees on Rikers Island,” said **Victor Pate, a member of the Vote in NYC Jails Coalition and The National Action Network**. “There are many barriers and impediments to this process when you go there and actually do the registration process, it becomes evident that full access does not include the eligible detainees on Rikers Island.”

Background

Since 2020, the Vote in NYC Jails Coalition has worked within Rikers Island to help people detained pretrial register to vote and request absentee ballots in advance of election day. This effort has led to increased voter engagement and awareness among incarcerated New Yorkers.

Despite these efforts, in 2024 only 546 people out of more than 5,000 eligible voters on Rikers Island were able to vote. Each year, thousands of eligible New Yorkers lose their right to vote because the absentee ballot process simply does not work in the jail setting.

The racial disparities are stark: more than 92 percent of the Rikers’ population is non-white, and the vast majority remain eligible to vote. Without polling sites, these New Yorkers are denied a voice in the democratic process, and today’s hearing marks a significant step forward following sustained advocacy from coalition members and partners who have worked to ensure that eligible voters in custody are able to exercise their fundamental right to vote. Advocates called on city leaders to strengthen policies and systems that guarantee equal ballot access for incarcerated New Yorkers.

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