

# **Rightsizing the New York City Department of Correction While Helping a Struggling Workforce**

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# Executive Summary

Since the New York City Council voted in 2019 to close Rikers Island and replace it with four borough-based jails, corrections officers' perspectives on their work have been largely absent from the conversation, even though they, too, will be impacted by Rikers' closure. This report addresses that gap.

From November 2023 to February 2024, Vera researchers conducted 30 in-depth interviews with 30 current and former corrections officers. Vera found that working at the New York City Department of Correction (DOC) takes an enormous physical and psychological toll on officers, and many of those interviewed reported that they stayed in the role because they felt it was their only path to financial security. There is an urgent need for city leaders to invest in career transition services to help DOC rightsize its workforce without inflicting economic harm on the current correctional workforce. To that end, Vera also spoke with five New York City-based workforce development experts to identify best practices to transition corrections officers to new fields.

In addition, the interviews make clear that DOC must equip officers who continue working in the jails with the skills and support they need to maintain their own physical and emotional well-being while ensuring the safety of people incarcerated in the borough-based jails.

The interviews led Vera researchers to several key findings:

- **Officers join DOC for the salary, benefits, and pension—and often feel trapped by them.**  
Every officer interviewed said they joined DOC for the salary, benefits, job security, and path to early retirement. The salary, benefits, and pension at DOC allow officers without college degrees a path to financial stability. However, pathways like this are so rare, and career services so inaccessible, that officers routinely feel trapped in the job.
- **Harmful working conditions take a toll on officers' physical and mental health.**  
Officers reported poor physical and mental health as a result of the job. They blamed their intense work schedule for bad eating habits, lack of physical activity, poor sleep hygiene, stress, anxiety, trouble attending medical appointments, and difficulty balancing their work and home lives. As a result, nearly every officer said they would not recommend the job to friends or family.
- **Officers feel unsupported by management.**  
Many officers said that DOC management does not help staff address physical and mental health needs, either proactively or after issues arise. Some of the officers Vera interviewed remarked that they felt like just a number to DOC. More than one said that management pressured them to return to work after injury before they were medically ready. Others recalled situations in which management urged them to ignore symptoms of trauma, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and return to their posts.
- **Favoritism determines scheduling, and by extension, well-being.**  
Several interviewees said that a culture of favoritism permeates every aspect of the job—from facility and post placement to overtime assignments, misconduct write-ups, meal relief, and promotions. Participants attributed the problematic culture they experienced to leadership and said that it trickled down through the ranks, lowering morale, eroding camaraderie, and increasing absenteeism.
- **Officers struggle to identify transferrable skills they develop on the job.**  
Interviewees struggled to identify skills they developed at DOC, with some saying they could not think of any skills that would be useful outside of a security setting. When pressed, most officers said their skills included interpersonal communication and situational awareness.

- **When they leave DOC, most officers stay in the security sector, though their interests are much more varied.**

Most participants felt that they were only qualified to go into security-related jobs. The majority of officers said they had colleagues who left DOC to join the New York City Police Department (NYPD) or to move to a different state and work for a different corrections department. When asked about their interests and career ambitions, however, interviewees mentioned film production, library sciences, hospitality, education, personal training, real estate, and more. Often, the barrier to pursuing these alternative career paths was not a lack of motivation, but rather a lack of resources and time.

- **New Yorkers seeking well-paid careers with low barriers to entry need more options.**

Corrections is one of too few well-paid career opportunities for New Yorkers without postsecondary degrees. Providing career transition services to current officers will help DOC rightsize its uniformed workforce, saving public funds while helping officers find new opportunities that do not place such a burden on their health and home lives. There was a clear consensus among workforce development experts that to facilitate these career transitions, city leaders must fund a program that creates a series of talent profiles, maps them onto new career pathways, and mobilizes robust support to help officers successfully reskill themselves and prepare for the next phases of their careers. Such a program should be a model for future initiatives that engage New Yorkers without postsecondary education—who may struggle to find well-paid jobs—at the start of their career searches to connect them with opportunities that lead to well-paid employment.

- **Officers who continue working at DOC need better training and support to maintain their health and improve conditions in the jails.**

Officers who remain working in the jails need more support than they currently receive. When asked how DOC could support them more effectively, officers had many ideas. Improved training, particularly when it comes to interacting with people with mental illness; enhanced access to mental health support; equitable processes for assigning officers to posts and overtime; and ongoing feedback mechanisms that allow leadership to hear directly from officers will all help DOC ensure that it is supporting officers' physical and mental well-being, which in turn may help improve jail conditions for incarcerated people.

Ultimately, investing in career transitions for corrections officers is an opportunity to reduce jail spending and invest in community-based solutions that prevent crime in the first place. It can also improve the lives of corrections officers who work for DOC because they feel they have no other options. In addition, supporting officers who remain at DOC may help keep the traumatic conditions of Rikers Island from taking root in the borough-based jails.

## Introduction

In 1895, New York City established what was then called the Department of Public Charities and Correction, now DOC. Since then, the agency has been responsible for overseeing the city's jails, including the 10 jails that make up the Rikers Island jail complex.<sup>1</sup> People on Rikers Island—both incarcerated people and DOC employees—have faced abhorrent conditions for decades, but in recent years, the dysfunction has led to a humanitarian crisis that has claimed dozens of lives and traumatized countless more individuals.<sup>2</sup>

In 2019, the New York City Council voted to shutter Rikers Island and transition to a network of four borough-based jails. These new facilities will be designed to minimize the worst harms of Rikers Island and will be located close to families and courthouses, enabling people in detention to stay connected to their loved ones, communities, and legal representation while awaiting trial.<sup>3</sup> Although Mayor Eric Adams's administration announced its inability to close Rikers Island by 2027, that date still remains the legal deadline to shut down the jail complex.<sup>4</sup>

The borough-based jails' maximum capacity—originally proposed to be 3,300 and now expected to be 4,160—requires that New York City dramatically decarcerate its citywide jail population.<sup>5</sup> This goal is supported by research showing that a jail-first approach to public safety actually makes communities less safe. For example, one study found that just one day in jail increases the likelihood of rearrest.<sup>6</sup> Beyond its effect on crime, jail in New York City is also incredibly costly: in 2021, a year's stay at Rikers cost more than \$550,000 per person.<sup>7</sup> Other evidence-based community programs and supports—like supervised release, supportive housing, and summer youth employment—are proven to improve public safety at a fraction of the cost of incarceration.<sup>8</sup>

The main reason for incarceration's high price tag in New York City is personnel. In 2023, DOC had roughly 400 more corrections officers on staff than people in jail, and more than 80 percent of the department's budget is driven by staff-related expenses.<sup>9</sup> DOC's staffing practices are an outlier: nationally, there is an average of one corrections officer for every four people in detention.<sup>10</sup>

DOC is already vastly overstaffed. One goal of the move from Rikers Island to the better designed borough-based jails is to further reduce the number of people behind bars, which will further diminish the demand for officers. Unless DOC begins taking action to rightsize its workforce now, the size of the uniformed workforce will increasingly eclipse the jail population—and as a result, the per capita cost of incarceration will climb. If that happens, DOC will either retain its unnecessarily costly headcount or need to conduct large-scale layoffs, causing economic harm to officers, their families, and their communities.

Beyond the fiscal implications of overstaffing, the negative impacts of a career in corrections are well documented. Multiple studies have shown the prevalence of PTSD among corrections officers. Two studies found that more than half of sampled officers screened positive for PTSD or met the criteria for a "provisional diagnosis" or a "probable diagnosis" of PTSD, compared to a rate of just 6.8 percent among adults in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Another study of roughly 300 corrections officers in an urban jail found that during the first year of employment, officers experienced significant symptoms of burnout and depression, particularly when they were also struggling to balance work demands and commitments at home.<sup>12</sup> A corrections officer's life expectancy is up to 16 years shorter than the United States average.<sup>13</sup>

For too long, New York City has relied on DOC to provide stable, well-paid jobs to New Yorkers who do not have postsecondary degrees; the job does not require a college degree and is one of few such positions in

**To help New York City's struggling correctional workforce while combating disproportionate jail spending, city leaders must urgently invest in career transition support for corrections officers.**

which a New Yorker can earn above \$100,000.<sup>14</sup> As City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams noted in her March 2023 “State of the City” address, New York City must invest in well-paid career opportunities—and corresponding training—for people without postsecondary degrees.<sup>15</sup> New Yorkers currently working as corrections officers must be a population of focus for such initiatives. From an economic equity perspective, investing in corrections officers is particularly important given the demographics of the workforce: nearly 84 percent of New York City corrections officers are Black or Latinx and 44 percent are women.<sup>16</sup>

## Research Methodology

Vera interviewed 30 current and former corrections officers to understand why they joined DOC, why they stayed, how their career impacted their health and home lives, and which other career paths they would consider if given proper support. Because of challenges engaging and building trust with corrections officers, Vera collaborated with consultants who had spent decades working on Rikers Island and had strong connections to officers. Together, the team reached out to 65 current and former corrections officers. Notably, though perhaps unsurprisingly, many officers were reluctant to speak with Vera. Ultimately, the team spoke with and included interviews from 30 participants.

Vera built its sample through a combination of purposive, quota, and snowball sampling.<sup>17</sup> First, to better understand not only why people become corrections officers but also why they leave or stay in the position, Vera spoke with on-the-job officers (n=8), retirees (n=13), and people who left before retirement (n=9). Second, rank-and-file corrections officers make up the majority of DOC’s workforce. For this reason, researchers interviewed mostly current and former corrections officers; only two participants had experience as captains or in other supervisory roles. Finally, DOC corrections officers are majority Black (63 percent) or Latinx (22 percent), and women make up 44 percent of this workforce.<sup>18</sup> To meaningfully reflect this population, Vera purposively recruited women and officers of color. Due to the dynamics of snowball sampling, however, Vera ultimately over-sampled Latinx and women officers. In sum, this report draws on interviews with 19 women (nine Latinx, nine Black, and one white) and 11 men (five Latinx, five Black, and one white).

Interviews were conducted via videoconference and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Vera’s consultant partners joined each interview to build trust between Vera staff and participants. Vera engaged every participant in a robust written informed consent process before each interview. Participants currently employed by the City of New York, at DOC, or any other municipal agency received no compensation; all other participants received a \$50 gift card for their time.

Interviews were transcribed by a confidential third-party service, coded by a single Vera researcher to ensure validity, and analyzed by the entire research team, which met weekly to discuss preliminary findings. All research staff vetted and agreed on all findings presented in this report.

Importantly, this research uses nonprobability sampling and, as such, is not representative of the views of all of DOC’s more than 6,000 uniformed employees or the thousands more who have retired, resigned, or otherwise separated from DOC. This same sampling strategy, however, allowed Vera to develop a deep, nuanced understanding of a sample of officers’ personal motivations and experiences on the job.

# Findings

## Officers join DOC for the salary, benefits, and pension—and often feel trapped by them

When asked why they joined DOC, all interviewed corrections officers said they were motivated by the salary, benefits, job security, and the belief that DOC made retirement not just attainable, but attainable at a relatively young age. In contrast, only two interviewees mentioned wanting to serve their community. One officer put it bluntly: “It’s all about the money.” Participants spoke about their aspirations to attain homeownership, participate in travel, or provide opportunities for their children that they themselves did not have. Often, those officers had worked in retail, manual labor, or other lower-wage jobs before joining DOC. One officer explained that uniformed city jobs “afford you a lifestyle that a lot of . . . city jobs don’t provide.” Another observed, “Where else are you going to clock \$120,000 with 39 college credits?”<sup>19</sup>

The majority of participants were encouraged to apply to DOC by family or friends with experience in corrections who recommended the job because of the salary and benefits. Prior to joining DOC, more than half of participants took multiple uniformed city tests—including for DOC, the New York City Fire Department (FDNY), NYPD, and the New York Department of Sanitation (DSNY)—and ended up at DOC simply because DOC called them first. In fact, some participants received subsequent calls from NYPD but decided not to transfer because they were already working in the jails and chose not to start over in a new career.

The salary, benefits, and pension at DOC often allow officers an attainable path to financial stability. However, pathways like this for people without college degrees are so rare, and career services so inaccessible, that officers routinely feel trapped in the job. One officer lamented, “You feel like you are bound to this job because you’ve made a certain amount of money. What else can I do?” Another said he wanted to find another job but “didn’t know what else to do to make the kind of money I was making.” Officers with children often see corrections as the only way to provide for their families. One participant said, “At the end of the day, it’s like, I need this job because it brings money for my kids.”

Officers said that when they joined DOC, they intended to remain there for the exact amount of time it would take to qualify for a full pension. A retired officer noted that his “goal was to complete [his] career. Not one day more.” For some participants, the promise of that pension kept them coming to work despite the job’s physical, mental, and personal costs. One officer said, “I never liked the job, but I did it. I stayed there for my pension.” Officers who want to leave the job feel trapped without the resources, training, or credentials that might otherwise provide them an off-ramp to a different career. “It’s not like

I continued education and I had my degree to just go get any other job out there,” said one officer. “I felt stuck.”

Financial security—and the fear of losing it—are not the only reasons people stay in the job. Retired participants, in particular, spoke of a tight-knit environment among officers. These officers remembered a culture of first needing to “earn your stripes,” but then being accepted by other officers, working together, and supporting one another. As one officer put it, “When you’re working so many hours, [colleagues] become your family. I saw them more than I saw my own family.” Ultimately, these officers mentioned the camaraderie among officers as the best nonfinancial aspect of their time on the job.

A few officers mentioned staying at DOC because of a sense of purpose, such as helping incarcerated people receive the services they need and mentoring both incarcerated young people and fellow officers. However, for the majority of interviewees, the paycheck and goal of retirement were more motivating than a sense of purpose or camaraderie.

## Harmful working conditions take a toll on officers' physical and mental health

Participants reported poor physical and mental health as a result of the job, including bad eating habits, lack of physical activity, poor sleep hygiene, stress, anxiety, trouble attending medical appointments, and difficulty balancing their work and home lives. These findings echo previous studies on corrections officers' health, including high rates of PTSD, depression, work-family conflict, and shortened life expectancy compared to the general population.<sup>20</sup>

**“Can’t say there’s much you enjoy about the job. There’s not much enjoyment other than you got a job, basically.”**

*DOC corrections officer*

Officers attributed their issues predominantly to a relentless schedule, poor working conditions, and a lack of management understanding and support. “We make good money,” said one officer. “But you pay for it. . . . When people retire, they don’t even make it two years.” Another echoed this sentiment, saying, “These people that give their life to this job don’t make it five years after retirement.” Participants said poor sanitation, frequent physical altercations, and instances of sexual assault created an unsafe and traumatizing work environment for them. One officer recalled, “Every time I entered, my heart started racing. . . . I would get constant chest pain and anxiety.” Of course, these same conditions harm incarcerated people, too.<sup>21</sup>

Participants blamed the intense schedule for their health problems. Because of mandatory overtime, officers routinely start their days expecting to work eight hours only to stay on Rikers for 16 or even 24 hours. For officers forced to work a double shift, that often leaves only eight hours between the end of one shift and the start of another, hardly time for anything other than their commute and a few hours of sleep. “You’re doing constant overtime,” remarked one officer. “It takes a toll on the body.” In one instance, an officer said a colleague suffered a minor heart attack but was expected to remain at his post until the end of his shift.

For officers with children, the long hours in uniform mean less time at home with family. Participants felt the job caused them to miss birthdays, graduations, and other milestones. In a particularly alarming case, one officer’s daughter was taken to the hospital, but supervisors “didn’t tell me till my shift was over because they didn’t want me to ask to leave early.” Some officers felt they were unable to actively participate in raising their children.

Because of the unpredictable schedule, some officers send their children to special day care programs that are open 24 hours a day. Others said they would not have been able to work at DOC without significant family support; extended family members often stepped in to take care of officers’ children with virtually no notice because of last-minute mandatory overtime shifts. One participant reflected, “You don’t have much of a home life,” and elaborated that officers’ children “grow up with all the advantages; they have all the best clothes, and they go on nice trips, but they don’t have their parent. These are the trade-offs for that job.”

Beyond the tough schedule, officers must also navigate significant emotional stress on the job and ensure that it does not negatively impact them at home. Participants said that to cope, they try to compartmentalize their emotions to separate work-related stress from their home lives. To achieve this, some participants adopt an aggressive demeanor and workplace identity entirely separate from their life outside jail. “You wouldn’t know this woman here that you’re talking to now. . . . I don’t smile. I don’t laugh,” one officer said. Another officer acknowledged, “You’re snapping at your kid, you’re snapping at your husband, you’re snapping at everybody because you are going through so much from the job, so much stress from the job.”

A few participants mentioned using their commute home to unwind and, when they are at home, refraining from discussing work matters with their spouses, partners, or children. Some officers noted that those who struggle with compartmentalization rarely last long at DOC. Compartmentalization, however, comes at a cost.

As one officer reflected, “You have to basically be other than yourself to get the job done.” Another lamented, “If you don’t maintain a work-life balance, that job will kill you. I think some people came out worse off.”

For participants who left before qualifying for the full pension, in several cases their departures were the result of particularly challenging situations with management. Former officers spoke about DOC cutting short their medical leave against their doctor’s advice or management ignoring feelings of physical unsafety and PTSD and urging them to return to their posts immediately after an assault or attempted assault.

When asked whether they would recommend the job to friends or family, 23 participants, or two-thirds of all interviewees, said they would not. Those who did say they would recommend the job primarily cited the pay and benefits. Some retired officers said they would have recommended the job 10 or 15 years ago because of the quality of life a DOC pension and salary enable, but even these participants said that current conditions for officers mean they would not do so now. One officer said that he would recommend the job because of the high salary, but only to someone “who is looking to have a career but [does not] really have the credentials” to do anything else. Another officer said, “For my kids, I would want better for them.” A third officer remarked, “Can’t say there’s much you enjoy about the job. There’s not much enjoyment other than you got a job, basically.”

**“You have to basically be other than yourself to get the job done.”**

*DOC corrections officer*

## **Officers feel unsupported by management**

Officers said that DOC management does not help staff address physical and mental health needs, either proactively or after issues arise. Officers remarked that they felt like just a number to DOC. Some officers said they were required to return to work after injury before they were medically ready, and others remembered times when management pressured them to ignore symptoms of trauma, depression, or PTSD.

DOC has a Correction Assistance Response for Employees (CARE) unit that, according to its website, “provides support, comfort and resources to officers.”<sup>22</sup> According to participants, however, many officers feel unable to access such services because “no one thinks it’s truly anonymous” and “these things go on your record.” Officers were afraid that using therapy or flagging physical or mental health issues would preclude them from future promotions or exclude them from certain desirable posts within the jails.

One officer who did see a therapist through the CARE unit after experiencing suicidal thoughts said, “They basically just tried to give me a pep talk and send me on my way.” Another said, “They refer you to outside therapists, but then when you come back with the information, they don’t want to honor it.” An officer who recently retired and did not access any mental health support while at DOC reflected, “I’m waking up with all my dreams ending in violence. . . . I was like, damn, maybe I should have been speaking to someone. When I was there, it never happened.”

Ultimately, despite DOC’s well-documented record of neglecting incarcerated people’s health care needs, some participants felt that DOC prioritized the mental and physical health of incarcerated people over the health of uniformed staff.<sup>23</sup> One officer observed, “If the incarcerated people needed to go to counseling, get help from counseling, they had social workers there for them, they had psychiatrists there for them. If they needed any kind of assistance in that sense, they had it.” On the other hand, if a corrections officer wanted to access mental health services, “you had to fight tooth and nail to get the time off to go.” Health care for incarcerated New Yorkers is notoriously and systematically inadequate.<sup>24</sup> Officers made clear during interviews that they feel management overlooks their mental health, as well.

The combination of poor working conditions and a lack of management support drove several interviewees to leave DOC before they qualified for a full or even partial pension despite their intentions to stay through retirement. One officer was out of work due to a medically confirmed injury and “started getting these [corrective disciplines] on why I was out this long and I had to appeal it. I was just so mentally over it.” The officer tried to reason with management and ended up resigning in frustration.

## **Favoritism determines scheduling and, by extension, well-being**

In response to questions about their least favorite parts of the job, nearly half of participants spoke of rampant politics, favoritism, and nepotism leading to difficult conditions for officers not in the “in-crowd.” Even retired officers acknowledged the prevalence of favoritism during their time at DOC, with a retired captain noting that “it is who you know. It’s always been that way.”

Officers said that DOC’s culture of favoritism permeated every aspect of the job—from facility and post placement to overtime assignments, misconduct write-ups, meal relief, and promotions. Participants attributed the problematic culture they experienced to leadership and said that it trickled down through the ranks.

For rank-and-file officers, favoritism impacted their careers by influencing their initial facility placement and then through the way captains made decisions about posts and scheduling. For example, officers spoke of “hook up” or “preferred” posts, which meant working better hours or in posts that entailed minimal contact with incarcerated people considered at high risk of violence. Participants said that management gave these preferred posts to new officers who knew someone influential or were related to a current or former officer. One former officer said that “if you were in the control room, it was because you had a very good rapport with whatever captain was there.” Conversely, an officer explained that “if the captain doesn’t like you for whatever reason, you’ll be in the cell area.” Another participant observed that “if you had some type of pull, you had a better post and you didn’t have to worry about just being on the floor with the [incarcerated people] the whole time.”

Favoritism also influences overtime decisions. One officer explained that captains were supposed to assign overtime to the officers who had worked the least amount of it, but “the way it actually works is if you know the captain and you don’t feel like doing overtime, then guess what, you’re not going to do it and they’re going to give it to me.” Another participant noted that being friendly with captains makes life much easier in terms of posts and overtime, stating that “if you’re buddy-buddy with a specific individual, that will determine what your day will be like . . . what your week [will] be like, your month, or maybe your career.” As a result, “the less work you do, the further your career goes” because it means an officer has important relationships.

Some participants said favoritism also leads to questionable promotion decisions. One interviewee who held a high-level position at DOC said she initially decided to apply for promotion because she was in disbelief that certain supervisors had been promoted. She felt that they lacked the management skills and expertise to be effective captains.

Overall, participants explained that the consequence of this culture was a marked reduction in morale, a feeling of being less connected with colleagues, and dissatisfaction with the job. One retired officer explained that by giving privileges to “a young lady that’s attractive” or someone because “this guy’s father worked there, you bring morale down.” Another officer lamented that “there’s just no morale” and “it’s each man to his own.”

That lack of camaraderie and morale, one officer observed, translates into issues with absenteeism. One officer noted, “There are people who play the game and they know how to . . . stay out of work for years and years and years.” Another echoed that because “the morale is destroyed,” officers “refuse to come to work.”

## **Officers struggle to identify transferrable skills they develop on the job**

To help identify best practices for rightsizing and redeploying the city's correctional workforce, Vera researchers asked participants what skills they developed while working as corrections officers. Participants struggled to identify skills, with some saying they could not think of any skills that would be useful outside of a jail setting. As one participant put it, officers do not learn "too many skills that you use in the outside world." "There's not much skills to learn once you're in the jail," said another.

Interviewees identified two primary sources of training and skill development: the academy and on-the-job experience. They described the academy as an important introduction to the job, although some said that it was largely insufficient to prepare them for work in the housing units—only hands-on experience could do that.<sup>25</sup>

At the academy, officers said they increased their strength and endurance, practiced close-quarters combat, familiarized themselves with the use of firearms and pepper spray, and learned how to use restraints. The rest of the academy curriculum focused on DOC rules, policies, and procedures.

By a large margin, the skill participants referenced most often was interpersonal communication. Although the academy reportedly teaches some interpersonal communication skills, participants said they really acquired the skill from life experience or while on the job. Relatedly, officers spoke of the importance of listening and being able to de-escalate tense or difficult situations, though participants often said they came into the job with this skill rather than learning it at the academy.

Participants also said they honed their situational awareness on the job, elaborating that they learned to keep their "head on a swivel" and emphasizing the importance of always "looking over your shoulder." This vigilance reflects the safety risks officers face as much as it does their job requirements. In addition, officers who worked specific jobs at DOC headquarters or other non-housing posts described basic computer and administrative skills they developed.

In terms of undeveloped skill sets, participants felt ill-equipped to engage with incarcerated people with mental illnesses or young people. One participant said she felt officers were "grossly undertrained when it comes to dealing with that sort of thing, which is very prevalent." Another officer, who worked in housing units for young people, said that she and her colleagues "weren't trained to deal with the adolescents."

## **When they leave DOC, most officers stay in the security sector, though their interests are much more varied**

Most corrections officers feel that they are only qualified to go into security-related jobs. "I was very doubtful of my professional value outside of correction," one officer remarked when discussing why she did not pursue other employment. She felt "that most of what we do . . . just doesn't translate outside of correction." As a result, nearly two-thirds of participants said they had colleagues who left DOC to join NYPD or to move to a different state to work for a different corrections department. One former officer became a 911 call operator, accepting a pay cut for better working conditions and more reasonable hours than she experienced at DOC.

In addition to NYPD, nearly two-thirds of participants mentioned colleagues who joined DSNY, FDNY, or the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to work better hours in better conditions while maintaining their pensions. Although less common, some officers left DOC early to join the Department of Education as teachers or substitute teachers. Outside of government, participants mentioned colleagues leaving to work for UPS or become truck drivers, two jobs they said had relatively high salaries and low barriers to entry. Other interviewees highlighted that officers often go into private security.

When asked about their interests and hypothetical career ambitions, either instead of a career at DOC or after retirement, officers mentioned interests in a variety of industries including film production, hospitality, education, personal training, real estate, and more. One officer wants to become a librarian. Another dreams of finishing her degree and opening a day care center. For officers who had transferred to DOC from other careers, such as commercial driving or medicine, their pre-DOC experiences could provide them with additional transferrable skills. Often, the barrier to pursuing alternative career paths is not a lack of motivation but a lack of support and time. “Most of us in corrections,” remarked one officer, “we don’t know what our skill set [is] and really what our resume would look like externally.” A retired officer said, “Right now if I was working as a corrections officer, I wouldn’t necessarily have the time to really dedicate myself to building that skill set in my day-to-day.”

## How New York City Can Support Officers to Find New Careers

Given the challenges of a career in corrections, New Yorkers without college degrees should have other options beyond corrections.

But DOC needs to be rightsized now, which means officers urgently need access to other career paths. Mass layoffs are not an equitable rightsizing strategy, as they would inflict economic harm on a workforce that is nearly 84 percent Black and Latinx and 44 percent women. At the same time, relying on natural attrition is not a viable option. According to data from the New York City Comptroller, over the last five years, annual uniformed attrition rates at DOC—driven mostly by resignation and retirement—have fluctuated from a low of 8.5 percent in 2020 to a high of 15.5 percent in 2022.<sup>26</sup> City leaders cannot expect attrition rates to remain predictable.

**“It’s not like I continued education and I had my degree to just go to any other job out there. I felt stuck.”**

*DOC corrections officer*

Beyond attrition’s unreliability, it also does not help facilitate career transitions for officers and, therefore, misses an opportunity to support this diverse workforce. In 2023, 51 percent of officers who left DOC had from three to 10 years of experience on the job.<sup>27</sup> These people likely would have benefited from career support. Officers still at DOC are mostly mid-career and may need career coaching and help developing new skills. Although 21 percent of officers have been on the job for 16 to 20 years, 42 percent of officers have worked at DOC for six to 10 years.<sup>28</sup> These mid-career officers will not simply be able to retire; transition support will help ensure that they can find new employment opportunities once they leave DOC.

Attrition also fails to address the underlying cultural issues that have made New York City’s jails so unsafe for incarcerated people and officers alike.<sup>29</sup> If high attrition rates persist, the officers who remain at DOC likely will do so because of the pay and benefits rather than a commitment to the goals of the borough-based jail plan. In this way, relying on attrition alone to reshape DOC’s workforce misses an opportunity to support officers who stay at DOC and change the agency’s culture in a way that improves conditions for everyone.

Providing career transition services to current officers is the best way to rightsize DOC’s uniformed workforce while connecting officers to new opportunities that do not place such a burden on their health and home lives. Facilitating career transitions will also help fill vacancies in city government, which is facing significant workforce shortages, as well as the private sector, which is anticipating substantial growth in the next several years.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to interviews with officers, Vera spoke with five New York City workforce development experts to understand best practices to support people through reskilling and career transitions and how to construct successful career services, as well as special considerations for people with experience in corrections. Each recommended that city leaders take the following steps to support a transitioning correctional workforce:

- **Create talent profiles.**

First, identify typical corrections officer skill sets to create a set of talent profiles that represent the majority of the workforce. One workforce development expert acknowledged that “it’s pretty unreasonable to take someone who’s been a corrections officer for a very long time and say, ‘What do you want to be?’” Instead, the expert recommended beginning the process with the question, “What are some of the core competencies of a corrections officer?”

- **Map out new career pathways.**

Next, map current experiences and skill sets onto new career pathways both within and outside of the municipal workforce, bearing in mind the changing talent needs of New York City’s public sector and private economy. One expert listed tech, construction, health care, retail, and hospitality as the top sectors with growing workforce needs. He recommended convening sector experts to compile a set of recommendations to align corrections officer experiences and qualifications with job descriptions in these sectors.

In terms of municipal job transitions, a 2022 report from the Office of the New York City Comptroller identified which municipal agencies have the highest vacancy rates.<sup>31</sup> These agencies include the Departments of Small Business Services, Buildings, City Planning, Housing Preservation and Development, Finance, the Office of Technology & Innovation’s Cyber Command, and the Child Support Division within the Department of Social Services. The Comptroller’s Office proposed a “Share Talent among Agencies” program, suggesting the temporary relocation of employees from overstaffed agencies to critically understaffed ones. This initiative could circumvent the qualification barriers faced by many corrections officers seeking municipal positions while exposing them to diverse career paths beyond corrections.

In addition to public sector vacancies, New York City’s private sector can provide employment opportunities for corrections officers. A 2021 report from the New York Department of Labor listed the top growing industries in the New York City economy, which include heavy and civil engineering construction, couriers and messengers, and warehousing and storage.<sup>32</sup> These industries may present options for corrections officers looking to transition out of corrections without pursuing further education, especially because some roles within these industries may provide on-the-job training.

Given the fact that many officers join DOC for the pay, generous pension, and relatively young retirement age, to be appealing, some new career pathways should offer similar salaries to what officers currently receive and should enable officers to maintain their municipal pensions in some form. For other officers, however, increasing their quality of life by changing careers may be enough of an improvement that they are willing to accept a modest reduction in pay or benefits.

- **Tailor support services for officers.**

Ensure adequate support for career transitions, including intensive career coaching and financial support for opportunities to reskill. Career coaching, in particular, is essential. One expert warned that a transition program should not “even bother [offering] an education program without the [career] advising.” Another expert recommended “a combination of one-on-one and group coursework that makes sure that at the end of the training you have a resume, you have a LinkedIn.” Experts flagged that compensation and childcare are two barriers to participation and must, therefore, be part of the support transitioning officers receive.

Several officers mentioned their interest in career support during interviews. “Yes, absolutely back-to-school funding,” said one officer. “That would help—or training. More skill building. Maybe help [officers] put their resume[s] together.” Another officer said that DOC “should have some type of system where they offer you reimbursement on your tuition.”

- **Mobilize service providers.**

Identify key service providers that can offer targeted career coaching, training, and other support to corrections officers. Two workforce development experts pointed to the private sector and artificial intelligence tools as potential partners to create talent profiles and career paths. They also identified Workforce1 as a service provider with the expertise and connections to help offer tailored career advising and training to officers.<sup>33</sup> The City University of New York’s Reconnect Program, which helps adult learners return to higher education, is another successful example of an existing program that could offer guidance and support to officers.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to mobilizing new services and support, city leaders can leverage existing training opportunities. According to the 2022 New York City Workforce Landscape, the sectors with the highest number of training and programs citywide were technology (18 percent of all programs), construction (14 percent), and health care (14 percent).<sup>35</sup> The report also highlighted that there are 114 tech-related certificate programs and 111 construction certificate trainings.

The workforce development experts also pointed out that the city needs to allow transitioning officers adequate time to explore new opportunities, upskill themselves, and find new employment. Therefore, it is essential that city leaders fund workforce transition programs now, before the closure of Rikers Island, to allow impacted officers enough time to prepare for the next phases of their careers.

## **How New York City Can Support Officers Who Stay at DOC**

Even with a smaller jail footprint, New York City will still need a correctional workforce. To ensure the borough-based jails do not recreate the worst harms of Rikers Island, DOC will need to retrain its workforce and actively promote a different culture in its facilities. Not only will this improve conditions for incarcerated people, but it will also mitigate some of the negative physical and mental health consequences associated with working in corrections.

In important ways, simply moving the jails off Rikers Island will transform working conditions for officers. For example, the borough-based facilities will likely shorten many officers’ commutes and alleviate some of the pressure they feel balancing work and home. In addition, the smaller borough-based jails may make meal breaks easier to take. On Rikers, some officers said they had to walk 20 minutes just to reach a room where they could take a meal break, by which point they immediately had to turn around and return to their posts.

**“I subscribe to the theory [that] more staff doesn’t equal more safety. It actually works in reverse.”**

*Former senior DOC official*

The borough-based jails’ smaller size may also make the job feel less stressful. Some participants noted that the jails on Rikers Island are simply too large to be safe. One officer said, “It’s too big in terms of you having 50 [incarcerated people] in a housing area and you have just one officer behind the gate with them. It’s not much that the officer can do if something happens. . . . If you come to a borough jail, the good thing about that, and I think a lot of officers would like, is that it’s smaller.” This sentiment among officers reflects research showing that in smaller prisons, incarcerated people often feel safer and better treated by staff.<sup>36</sup>

Rightsizing DOC staff may even help reduce violence. As one former senior DOC official observed, “I subscribe to the theory [that] more staff doesn’t equal more safety. It actually works in reverse. The more staff you put at something, the more [stuff is] going to happen. . . . You need one good correction[s] officer, two good correction[s] officers to run a housing unit. You don’t need six.”

In other ways, however, DOC will need to take an active role in changing its culture to make the jails safer for incarcerated people and officers alike. To do so, DOC must take the following steps:

- **Improve officer training and increase professional development opportunities.**

Officers need more comprehensive training in de-escalation, how best to interact with people experiencing mental illness, and other “soft skills.” Interviewees said that these topics are not adequately covered in the academy.

It is also not enough to train officers only at the start of their time with DOC. Some participants felt that because training happened only once, they missed opportunities to improve their skills and develop professionally. DOC must offer ongoing professional development to ensure that officers have the skills and knowledge they need to perform their jobs safely. As part of these efforts, DOC should also create opportunities for DOC staff to learn from institutions recognized for promoting human rights and dignity for both officers and incarcerated people.

- **Support officer well-being through mental health and other services.**

DOC must ensure officers have access to robust mental health services that support their well-being. Participants said that after an assault or other traumatic experience, their supervisors provide no support and simply tell them to return to their posts. Given the trauma inherent to the job, DOC must ensure that supervisors give officers time to access mental health services so they can process their experiences in a healthy way.

DOC must also ensure that using the CARE team’s services is truly confidential and will not impact someone’s career prospects. “These officers need to talk and get help,” said one participant. “A lot of officers, they’re going through stuff silently.” Increasing access to mental health support should improve officer morale and safety.

In addition, DOC should provide team-building and wellness opportunities for staff who work in the same housing unit. DOC should also institute peer support groups for staff. These groups can play an important role in debriefing after traumatic incidents, acknowledging staff achievements, uplifting staff concerns, and providing day-to-day support. Finally, DOC should provide family orientation programming for new staff so that officers’ families know how to recognize and mitigate stress, as well as how to access counseling and other support services for themselves and their loved ones.

- **Update staffing practices to be more equitable.**

DOC must update its staffing practices to ensure officers are assigned to posts and kept for mandatory overtime in an equitable way that does not succumb to favoritism. Participants felt that the current ad hoc system for assigning posts and overtime was opaque and unfair. Rotating officers between higher- and lower-stress posts and distributing overtime equally may reduce burnout and improve morale, in turn improving conditions for both incarcerated people and DOC employees.

- **Listen to officers about how best to support them.**

To ensure that DOC meets the needs of current and future corrections officers, the agency should create confidential feedback mechanisms for leadership to hear directly from officers about how best to support their health and well-being. Nearly every participant mentioned feeling invisible to DOC management. One officer said that DOC’s culture made her feel like “no matter what rank you are, you’re not really important. You’re just a number.” DOC should also mandate that supervisors have frequent check-ins with their direct reports to maintain strong lines of communication. Improved communication among officers, supervisors, and leadership can help ensure that DOC creates processes and provides resources that meet its workforce’s needs.

Improving the working conditions for corrections officers who stay at DOC can be done in tandem with improving jail conditions across the board: for non-uniformed staff, for incarcerated people, and for their loved ones. Too often, people see the well-being of corrections officers as in tension with the well-being of incarcerated people—yet dehumanizing jail conditions impact everyone. Supporting corrections officers with

better training, accessible mental health services, and equitable scheduling practices can, in turn, improve conditions for incarcerated people.

## Conclusion

As city leaders move New York down the path toward closing Rikers Island, they must remember that shuttering the decrepit jail complex, in and of itself, is not enough. Simply changing the physical structures of New York City's jails may not address DOC overspending, the dehumanizing culture that harms incarcerated people, or the traumatizing working conditions that impact corrections officers. To truly transform New York City's jails, city leaders must reckon with the agency behind the facilities and the New Yorkers behind the shield numbers.

Addressing DOC's overstaffing by providing career transition services to current corrections officers can help rightsize DOC's personnel rolls. It should support a struggling workforce more effectively than if the city relies on fluctuating attrition rates or resorts to mass layoffs. Corrections officers interested in other employment will have the resources and support to pursue new career paths. Such a workforce development program can make New York's economy more inclusive, unlocking new opportunities for corrections officers—many of whom are Black and Latinx women—who currently work at DOC because they feel it is their only option.

Reducing DOC's staffing costs should also free up funding for vital community-based safety programs that help keep people out of jail in the first place. Even bringing the budgeted head count in line with DOC's actual head count projections as of January 2024 would save \$162 million—enough to fund more than 3,800 supportive housing beds for New Yorkers in need.<sup>37</sup>

In parallel, city leaders must think critically about how to support and develop the officers who remain at DOC. Doing so can help ensure that the borough-based jails live up to their promise of leaving the dysfunction of Rikers Island in the past and creating a new culture that benefits both corrections officers and incarcerated people.

Throughout the process, corrections officers must be part of the conversation. Their perspectives must help shape the support they receive—either to stay with DOC or to find new opportunities elsewhere. New York City's economy is too vibrant, and its talent needs too broad, for a jail to be anyone's only career option.

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