

**Testimony before the NYC City Council  
Committee on Aging**

**Preliminary Budget Hearing**

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Wendell Walters, and I am a Senior Policy Associate in the Center for Justice Across Generations at Osborne Association. For nearly nine decades, our organization – founded by a former prison warden and led for 40 years by a former Commissioner of the NYC Department of Correction under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia – has been committed to transforming prisons and jails for the people who live in them, work in them, and visit them. Today we offer a wide range of diversion and reentry programs at sites in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, Buffalo, and Newburgh, as well as services at more than thirty New York State prisons and New York City jails including Rikers Island.

As a member of the ATI/Reentry Coalition, we have been fortunate to have received discretionary Council funding for several years that has enabled us to support our Court Advocacy Services, as well as programs focused on elders in jail and reentry, video visiting that enables families to stay connected to loved ones in upstate prisons as well as Rikers Island, and a range of employment services citywide. We appreciate the Council's support in the past and look forward to working with new Councilmembers alongside longtime colleagues.

I want to congratulate the new Aging Chair and its new committee members. Welcome, Councilmember Hudson. I hope that your tenure as the chair of this important committee is successful — as the aging population in our city steadily increases. We look forward to working with you. As has been the case over several fiscal years, we support the Department for the Aging (DFTA) and its need for additional funding to provide the necessary services for this community. My testimony focuses on the aging population that often goes unrecognized. I'm speaking of the older adults returning from incarceration. Today there are approximately 8,000 people over age 50 in New York State prisons. They now represent 25 percent of our State's prison population. At the time of the latest report from state corrections, there were more than 1000 men and women aged 50 and over who leave state prison and return to New York City each year.

These individuals have unique challenges as they reintegrate themselves back into our communities. In many cases, they have been away for a very long time, and during this time, the world has changed in so many ways. There are recurring challenges with technology, transportation, banking, proper identification, navigating the complex world of public benefits, and finding an affordable place to live. We at Osborne applaud the City Council for recognizing this increasingly important issue when it passed a resolution several years ago to create the Compassionate Assistance for Returning Elders (CARE) Taskforce. This inter-agency task force, led by DFTA and the Mayor's Office for Criminal Justice (MOCJ) and included Osborne and other criminal justice advocates and service providers, was charged with compiling a set of recommendations to provide support to previously incarcerated older adults when they come home. Although the Taskforce has not been able to consistently meet due to the COVID crisis, a list of elder reentry recommendations

was created at the end of the year and Council session to address housing, mental health counseling, healthcare, and the expansion of existing services. These recommendations now sit with MOCJ and the current administration. We call on the administration to make the recommendations public and continue the Taskforce's commendable efforts to help implement its recommendations. We also call on the Council and this committee to support the Osborne funding request of \$150,000 for dedicated staff to advance this work.

Osborne has been a leader in the field of elder reentry. Our Elder Reentry Initiative (ERI) program provides case management and support for elders returning to New York City from city jails and state prisons. Since FY 2017, ERI has supported more than 400 elders with transition planning, referrals to health services, housing, peer mentoring, social isolation support, and a wide range of other support in the community while maintaining a recidivism rate of less than 2 percent. The program, which works within the spectrum of jail and prison-based Osborne programs, improves community receptivity and access to responsive geriatric services for our elders. We also partner with senior centers to increase referrals and cross-train service providers in healthy aging and corrections to ensure City agencies and providers are better able to address these co-occurring challenges. We have submitted a funding request in the amount of \$150,000 to continue this important work, and we ask for the committee's support.

Safe housing is the primary reentry challenge for people returning to their communities after jail and prison. More than half of the people returning from state prison enter the shelter system. Older adults who are previously incarcerated and away for many years – too often decades – have a particular set of reentry challenges. They generally no longer have relationships in their community and need time to transition back into society. With that in mind, Osborne is developing our own model of reentry housing for this community. Targeted to open in June, the Fulton Community Reentry Center will provide 135 beds to those leaving a correctional facility, with an emphasis on older returnees. The building will include space to share meals, foster community, and hold classes, training sessions, support groups, events, and private counseling. Most importantly, we will work to reunify people with loved ones. As we have in previous fiscal years, we are requesting funding to support the operation of this facility and hope for the support of the council and this committee.

Finally, as we consider all these challenges for older adults, we have to think and talk about age itself. The previously incarcerated older adult who is 55 years of age and spent many years in state prison has been subject to a condition in our field that is called "accelerated aging." Acute mental trauma, poor healthcare, poor nutrition, and disconnection from family and community advance the aging process. Even the state Corrections Department commissioner is quoted as saying, "[people] 65 and older in a community translates to 55 and over in prison."

Save for but two of DFTA's programs, those younger than 60 will generally not be able to access senior center services that include meals and congregate programming, homebound services for case management, and home-delivered meals. These programs are essential to re-integration for previously incarcerated older adults. We call on DFTA and the administration to grant eligibility to this population at the age of 55. It is these services to which they generally need the most access. Accelerated aging is a condition that should be recognized by the city when it comes to providing services to the aging community of the previously incarcerated.

For nearly 90 years, Osborne has been working at the intersection of policy and practice. All of our work is grounded in an understanding of people's capacity to change, and in the importance of relationships, across generations, and we build our programs and services to ensure individuals and their families have the right and the opportunity to heal from and repair harm, restore their lives, and thrive. We support robust efforts to provide people who come home from jail and prison with housing, a connection to healthcare, and access to the kind of opportunities we all need to survive and live our best lives.

We believe public safety includes investing in and strengthening communities, expanding alternatives to jail and prison, and implementing pre-trial reforms and measures to expedite court processes. Achieving public safety requires creative, data-informed approaches to reducing the number of people detained in the city's jails, and closing Rikers Island (a commitment the City has made with the support of the Council) where people are currently spending unprecedented amounts of time, with dire consequences to their health, families, and long-term wellbeing. We call on you to stand strong in affirming current bail and pre-trial reforms and Raise the Age, and oppose the governor's 10 point plan, a reactive, damaging approach that will bring us backwards into the era of mass incarceration from which we were finally emerging.

We hope that the Council will favorably consider our funding requests and recognize the importance of our work with the aging community that has been affected by incarceration. Our expertise and programming in this field has proven to be successful. More and more individuals of advanced age are coming home to New York City after being away for many years. The challenges they confront each day should be addressed by our city, and Osborne is here to help them. Thank you.

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