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**Center for Justice Innovation**  
**New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing**  
**Public Protection**  
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Thank you Senate Finance Committee Chair Krueger and Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chair Pretlow for holding today’s joint legislative hearing on Public Protection. My name is Hailey Nolasco, Senior Director of Government Relations at the Center for Justice Innovation (the Center). I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the impact of our Community Justice Centers on public safety.

The Center works to reduce the harms of both community violence and overreliance on traditional responses like incarceration through a community justice lens, bridging courts, government, and communities, increasing communication, understanding, and trust.

Community Justice Centers are at the core of the Center’s ethos. They work to identify and address the underlying causes of one’s involvement in the justice system, whether it be addiction, poverty, homelessness, or mental illness. Additionally, they bring communities together. Amid growing concerns about the decline of community cohesion and civic engagement, Chief Judge Wilson writes, we must “invest in institutions and spaces that reanimate community life.” Community Justice Centers offer a powerful example of how we can make those investments for the most vulnerable communities in New York and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

Our Justice Centers across New York State work to restore accountability and individuality to the justice system, building perceptions of trust and responsiveness in the community. They are hyperlocal, tailored to the needs of specific neighborhoods and can be based off of either a court-based model or community-resource based model. Community Justice Centers utilize a collaborative approach to problem solving that combines the power of the community with the courts and we ask to be considered for further investment.

### **Court-Based Model**

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, R. D. (2025, January 13). *Reanimating Community Life Through Community Justice Centers*. New York Law Journal.  
<https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2025/01/13/reanimating-community-life-through-community-justice-centers/?slreturn=20250128113009>

Our court-based Community Justice Centers offer in-house court services in addition to a range of community resources. Here, residents can address criminal, civil, family, and housing related court cases in a convenient and accessible manner. Our Community Justice Centers follow the tenets of procedural justice, such as transparency about the legal process and humanizing language from court staff, including the judge. Justice Centers such as our Midtown, Redhook, Harlem, and New Rochelle Community Justice Centers are intentionally and seamlessly integrated within the community, designed to serve the needs of residents, and not the other way around. Instead of prison or jail, where community members may not have access to vital services, mandates may include drug treatment, job training, community service, adult education, and more; all meant to provide participants with the tools needed to live successfully in their communities.

### **Midtown Community Justice Center**

Launched in 1993, the Midtown Community Justice Center's goal is to reduce crime and incarceration and increase public trust in justice. The Midtown Community Justice Center works along the criminal justice system continuum to constructively address harm through alternatives to incarceration, diversion from Criminal and Family Court, street outreach for unhoused individuals, and community engagement initiatives. The Justice Center collaborates with the judiciary, defense agencies, and the district attorney's office to respond creatively to low-level crime with a supportive, holistic approach that addresses vulnerable community members' needs and reduces harm to victims, defendants, and communities. Midtown Community Justice Center staff provide client-centered, trauma-informed case management, group and individual counseling, and also help connect people in need to voluntary services and lead events and initiatives to promote community wellness. A survey of over 500 Midtown residents more than four years after the program opened found that 92 percent were satisfied with the neighborhood and a majority believed the neighborhood had become safer.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Expansion of Community First*

Community First, an initiative of the Midtown Community Justice Center, is a holistic, community-based approach to street outreach. The Community First model utilizes Community Navigators who share life experiences with people living and spending time on the streets. Initial contacts focus on addressing immediate needs, building trust, and offering ongoing mobile case management. The time spent building trust with community members in need results in those individuals confidently engaging in critical services with greater chances for long-term success.

The Community Navigator team heads out into the neighborhood with clothing, socks, blankets, food, and other materials to begin engaging individuals in conversations around their needs. Community Navigators also link people with services that may be difficult, if not impossible, for them to access, like bathroom facilities, general wellness support, haircuts,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

showers, and laundry services. These may be people who are experiencing homelessness, staying in a local shelter, or are in need of mental health services, harm reduction services, benefits connections, medical treatment, or any number of other services.

Once a rapport between a Navigator and a participant is established, linkages to longer-term services can be made that support the most vulnerable residents in achieving stability. Distinct from New York City's Department of Homeless Services-funded street outreach, Community First's wrap-around approach is a much-needed innovation in the field of mental health crisis response that draws from well-researched principles, including the use of peer support in the behavioral health context and the importance of continuity of care.

In partnership with city agencies and community-based partners, including but not limited to Fountain House, Breaking Ground, and CUCS: Center for Urban Community Services, Community First takes a client-centered, trauma-informed approach, protecting the agency of the client when creating service plans and identifying goals and next steps. Since launching in 2021, the Community Navigator team has engaged 1,334 individuals and completed over 4,380 interactions through the end of 2024.<sup>3</sup>

The Center is requesting additional funding of \$1.5 million annually across five years to allow Community First operations to conduct outreach in multiple neighborhoods throughout Manhattan. The budget includes a van that will allow Navigators flexibility to move between Manhattan hot spots as needed.

### *Support for the Amsterdam Houses and Amsterdam Addition*

After a string of shootings in late 2023 and into 2024 in and around the Amsterdam Houses, the Midtown Community Justice Center staff met with the Amsterdam Houses Resident Association to discuss concerns and brainstorm solutions. Staff learned that the development was experiencing rising violence, shootings, and robberies, specifically young people stealing groceries and food deliveries from elderly residents, and a general lack of community engagement and harmful behavior among young residents. There was also a dearth of opportunities and widespread unaddressed mental health issues. The Resident Association requested support in helping to improve these conditions.

The Center has significant experience co-creating community safety initiatives in NYCHA developments alongside residents. Since 2016, our Neighborhood Safety Initiatives ("NSI") team has served as an implementation partner for the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety's NeighborhoodStat, a NYCHA resident-driven, community organizing initiative of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. NSI works to improve public safety and strengthen community well-being by investing in public housing residents, transforming public spaces, and influencing policy.

Utilizing the well-tested NSI model, the Center for Justice Innovation will lead an assessment of the Amsterdam Houses and Amsterdam Addition and develop tailored

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<sup>3</sup> Center for Justice Innovation. (2025). Justice Center Application database. [Data file].

programming to support young people impacting public safety and quality of life in the community. The project's objectives include (1) developing and implementing a targeted, place-based, resident-driven community engagement strategy; (2) implementing research-based strategies to improve public safety and (3) building the capacity of the community and cross-sector local partners to promote the health and well-being of Amsterdam residents on an ongoing basis.

In collaboration with NSI, Midtown Community Justice Center will interview a diverse group of Amsterdam and Amsterdam Addition residents, including teens and emerging adults, to identify their concerns and priorities related to safety in their community. Through a participatory design process, the Midtown Community Justice Center team and Amsterdam residents will identify challenges, establish priorities, and develop an implementation plan for the project. Midtown Community Justice Center is also requesting funds to recruit and pay Amsterdam and Amsterdam Addition residents to participate in the needs assessment, and in the project's implementation. Through events such as resource fairs, Midtown Community Justice Center will get to know the Amsterdam community, engender trust, and recruit participants for the design process and subsequent programming.

The project will put money in the pockets of young people, with Midtown Community Justice Center paying stipends for participation in cohort-based programming. In its work with young people in other NYCHA developments, NSI has offered mentorship, courses in coding, music, photography, and entrepreneurship, educational support, healing and justice events, public education campaigns, workforce development support, and more. Midtown Community Justice Center will tailor the offerings to the young people's interests, and approach local assets like Lincoln Center, Fordham University, Goddard Riverside, and John Jay College to partner and bring additional resources to bear. Cohorts generally run for 12 weeks and incorporate mindfulness education, restorative practices, peer support, and hard skills, such as job training, as well as social-emotional and leadership skills.

The Center is requesting \$250,000 per year over five years in funding from the state to complete this vital community safety project.

### **New Rochelle Community Justice Center**

The New Rochelle Community Justice Center team is taking a new approach to building safety and reducing crime—including gun violence—throughout the city. It grew out of the Opportunity Youth Part, a special courtroom that connects young adults with criminal charges to supportive services for education, employment, and life guidance. Since inception, 122 young people have completed the Opportunity Youth Part program, the vast majority of them graduating without a criminal record.<sup>4</sup>

Our New Rochelle Community Justice Center team expands on that vital work, connecting young people to mentors to support their growth, hosting workshops on the harms of

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<sup>4</sup> OYP Court Resource Coordinator (2025)

gun violence, and empowering youth to become community leaders and changemakers. More recently, they have also partnered with local businesses to set participants up with internships that help them build their job skills while contributing to the economic health of their neighborhoods.

Building trusting relationships is key to the sort of collaboration necessary for a functioning Justice Center. The work takes buy-in from everyone—from public defenders and prosecutors to community members and business owners. The Project Director, Amanda Nathan says, “You really need to have both—courts and communities—to have Community Justice. No one group has all the answers, so working in tandem and having all voices heard is so vital in this process.”<sup>5</sup>

As they continue to work in court to set young people up for stronger futures, the New Rochelle team is also out and about, hosting events and discussions to hear directly from residents what their needs are and what kinds of investments they would like to see in their community. Their ultimate goal is to provide a safe haven that community members can rely on for support, whether they have a criminal case or not and we urge the legislature for increased support to increase programming needs.

### **Community Resource-Based Model**

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Our community resource-based Community Justice Centers such as the Brownsville and Staten Island Community Justice Centers, offer similar wraparound services to the court-based model, without the presence of an in-house court room. Functioning as a community resource, they offer youth activities, including paid internships, afterschool programming, educational courses, workforce development, housing help and local events. In addition, many offer court mandated services such as alternatives to incarceration, alternatives to detention, and Supervised Release. While each justice center is tailored to the unique needs of the neighborhood, they all have a common thread. Community Justice Centers take a holistic view of the individual in their environment, combining micro and macro situational factors for the benefit of the individual and the local community and we are asking for support of the below justice centers.

### **Bronx Community Justice Center**

The Bronx Community Justice Center works to create a safer, more equitable Bronx through community-driven public safety initiatives, youth opportunity, and economic mobility efforts focused in the South Bronx. Our vision is to support the South Bronx community to become a safe and thriving place where local ownership, community-led investment, and youth opportunity can flourish. The Bronx Community Justice Center works toward this vision by

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<sup>5</sup> *New Rochelle Forges a Path to New Community Justice Center*. Center for Justice Innovation. (2024, September 4). <https://www.innovatingjustice.org/articles/new-rochelle-community-justice-center>

focusing on community safety, youth opportunity, neighborhood investment, restorative practices, and economic development.

The Center is requesting \$2 million to expand its presence at its current home at 630 Jackson Avenue, to become a fully operational justice center and amplify the impact of its current neighborhood-centric approach and allow it to grow in response to the needs of the South Bronx Community.

The South Bronx Community Justice Center will be a local hub for alternatives-to-incarceration, youth development, and community safety services. The specific components of this initiative will be determined after a participatory research study designed to engage local residents, particularly young people, to share their views on the safety issues facing the neighborhood and the potential solutions to be implemented. In the first several months, the Center will hire and train South Bronx residents to conduct a community needs assessment, ensuring better informed and more equitable programming while producing a cohort of trained residents with expertise at analyzing and trouble-shooting community issues. The research findings of this participatory action research project will be used to develop future programmatic recommendations that the Justice Center will then implement. Besides the development of new programming, the Justice Center will continue the legacy of the multi-service center by offering space to local community-based non-profits that will offer programs and services.

### **Staten Island Community Justice Center**

The Staten Island Justice Center seeks to reduce crime and incarceration by providing court-involved participants and community members with a variety of services and prevention programs. The Staten Island Justice Center provides an array of programs for both youth and adults that are impacted by the justice system. Services include individual counseling, psychoeducational group programming, youth leadership, mentorship programming, and workforce development training for opportunity youth. For justice-involved clients, the Justice Center's holistic approach seeks to prevent the negative consequences that often accompany contact with the criminal legal system while addressing clients' needs in order to prevent future system involvement. Youth programming is aimed at providing participants with leadership development tools and connecting them to opportunities that promote positive engagement with the community.

The Center is asking for \$2 million to renovate the old Municipal and Magistrates Court House of Staten Island to become the permanent home of the Staten Island Justice Center. In the words of Richmond County District Attorney Michael McMahon, "For this neighborhood, hopefully it's a physical manifestation of our efforts to transform the justice system, to continue for it to be effective but also to be fair to everyone involved, victims and defendants alike. And

for the community to be a place that'll be able to get access to resources that are not physically available here in this neighborhood and in this community.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Conclusion**

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The Center for Justice Innovation has a long history of developing and implementing successful community-based public safety projects. Solutions are responsive and tailored to community needs, and led by local stakeholders who understand the importance of building trust and healing harm. We are asking for critical funding for Community Justice Centers in the Bronx, Staten Island and New Rochelle, and for the expansion of Community First, and Amsterdam Houses programming within our Midtown Community Justice Center in the hopes of expanding community safety. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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<sup>6</sup> Peteley, L. (2024, October 13). *An exclusive look inside 100-year-old courthouse eyed for Innovative Staten Island Justice Center*. SILive.com.  
<https://www.silive.com/crime-safety/2024/10/an-exclusive-look-inside-100-year-old-courthouse-eyed-for-innovative-staten-island-justice-center.html>