



INDEPENDENT
PRISON OVERSIGHT
SINCE 1844

**Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2026 Executive Budget Proposal: Public Protection
Testimony of Jennifer Scaife, Executive Director, Correctional Association of New York
February 12, 2026**

Greetings, Chairs Krueger and Pretlow, and members of the Senate and Assembly.

My name is Jennifer Scaife. I am the Executive Director of the Correctional Association of New York (CANY). Under §146 of New York's Correction Law, CANY is charged with visiting and examining the state's correctional facilities to identify and report on prison conditions, the treatment of incarcerated individuals, and the administration of policy. For more than 180 years, CANY has been the only organization with express authority to conduct routine, independent oversight of New York's prisons.

I am here with a clear message: New York cannot afford to step back from independent prison oversight at the very moment the system has demonstrated—again and again—how urgently it is needed. CANY respectfully urges Governor Kathy Hochul and the Legislature to ensure continuity of independent oversight by renewing support for CANY in the amount of \$3.127 million in the FY26-27 state budget.

A Year of Tragedy, Tumult, and Transformation

Over the past year, prisons in New York State have been wracked with instability following a series of deeply troubling events: the killing of Robert Brooks at Marcy Correctional Facility and the killing of Messiah Nantwi at Mid-State Correctional Facility; an unlawful correctional officer strike that paralyzed prison operations; and ongoing staffing challenges that have delayed access to essential medical care for incarcerated individuals and required the assistance of the National Guard at a cost swelling to \$1 billion, underscoring how profoundly these disruptions reverberate—for incarcerated people, staff, and taxpayers. These events are not isolated. They reflect longstanding, systemic failures resulting from patchwork, reactive reforms that have failed to create meaningful accountability. The people who live and work in prisons have paid the price.

This is precisely the context in which independent oversight should be well-resourced and sustained as an essential public safety function, an early-warning system, a source of credible evidence, and a mechanism to identify emerging risks before they escalate into tragedy.

In 2025, Governor Hochul and the Legislature took significant steps to demonstrate that the status quo in New York's prisons is unacceptable. Governor Hochul issued bold corrective actions in response to the murder of Robert Brooks at Marcy Correctional Facility in December 2024, including a \$2 million commitment in new funding for CANY. In the FY25-26 enacted state budget, CANY received an additional \$1.127 million in legislative appropriations to expand and deepen its oversight of state prisons. These investments have enabled CANY to strengthen our monitoring and reporting, and to engage policymakers with more frequent, timely, and actionable insight.

In December 2025, the Governor signed the Prison Reform Omnibus Bill, sponsored by Senator Julia Salazar and Assemblymember Erik Dilan, which fortifies transparency and accountability across the prison system and equips CANY with additional tools to fulfill its mandate.

The proposed Executive budget for FY26-27 risks losing ground on these important gains by failing to renew the \$2 million investment in CANY's independent oversight activities. In other words, just one year after CANY figured prominently in the Governor's response to the murder of Robert Brooks, the Executive has discontinued its support.

Oversight is not a one-time intervention. It is a long-term commitment to accountability and meaningful change.

What New York Gains from Oversight and What it Stands to Lose

Over the past year, CANY has moved quickly to implement the \$3.127 million appropriated in FY25-26 to meet the needs of a system in crisis.

Intensive monitoring with repeated presence: CANY launched an intensive prison monitoring initiative, designed to increase the depth, consistency, and usefulness of oversight. This is not simply more visits; it is repeat visits, deeper interviews, stronger documentation, and clearer follow-up, allowing CANY to identify patterns, measure progress, and assess whether conditions are truly improving over time.

Key performance indicators and measurable accountability: Working with DOCCS, CANY has established key performance indicators (KPIs) to track issues surfaced during monitoring and assess progress. In a system constrained by legacy infrastructure and fragmented data, KPIs help convert oversight from anecdote into measurement, trend, and accountability, supporting better decision-making across the system.

Expanded oversight activity and engagement: Since the start of FY25-26, CANY has conducted 17 comprehensive monitoring visits, with five additional monitoring visits planned by the end of March 2026—a significant increase over the same period in the prior fiscal year and a direct result of increased state investment in oversight. In parallel, CANY has held 84 briefings and meetings with legislators and state officials, partnered with members of this Legislature on joint facility visits, and produced public-facing analyses and reports grounded in monitoring findings, FOIL requests, and administrative data. Over this period, CANY published 15 reports, including progress reports on the implementation of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act and the Medication Assisted Treatment Law, as well as analyses highlighting systemwide issues such as staffing shortages, the rollout of fixed and body-worn cameras, and the escalating mental health crisis among incarcerated people.

Achievable recommendations for improvement: Importantly, CANY's monitoring does not end with documentation: we have communicated numerous facility-specific and system-level recommendations to DOCCS to address urgent concerns surfaced during visits and through correspondence from incarcerated individuals. Drawing on this work, CANY recently issued a series of recommendations to DOCCS, which reflect both longstanding oversight priorities and emerging risk identified through intensive monitoring.

The recommendations emphasize the need for practical modernization, near-term operational fixes, and continued accountability, including:

- Modernizing communication and information systems by expanding the use of tablets to provide real-time facility updates, access to key documents, and improved communication between administrators and incarcerated people—an achievable first step toward broader technological modernization.
- Addressing urgent facility-level deficiencies identified during monitoring, including extreme heat conditions, lack of essential items, inconsistent visitor processing, gaps in mental health programming, and delays in medical and grievance response caused by acute staffing shortages.
- Strengthening confidential reporting and accountability mechanisms, including ensuring incarcerated people can report concerns without staff mediation and reinforcing protections for privileged correspondence.
- Reinforcing and tracking implementation of prior recommendations, particularly those related to programming availability, staff training and wellness, compliance with HALT, and improvements to food access, commissary products, and package processing.
- Elevating successful reforms already underway, including expanded camera deployment, free phone calls, OMH-led programming pilots in Residential Rehabilitation Units, and partnerships focused on culture change—demonstrating how oversight-informed recommendations can translate into concrete policy and practice improvements.

Renewed Urgency for Reform and Continued Funding

The urgency now is straightforward: New York's prison system remains unstable, public scrutiny is heightened, and the State has already acknowledged the necessity of independent oversight. The question before us is whether the FY26-27 budget will reflect these realities.

Despite overseeing a correctional system that operates with an annual budget in the billions, CANY's public funding remains modest. The FY25-26 appropriation of \$3.127M for CANY represented just 0.000721% of DOCCS' FY25-26 appropriation of \$4.337 billion. For this fraction of the corrections budget, CANY provides outsized value: transparency in a closed system, early identification of risk, and credible, independent insights that support safer living and working conditions and more effective public policy.

As elected leaders negotiate the FY26-27 budget, they face a clear choice: whether to treat independent prison oversight as a one-off response to a crisis years in the making, or as a central function of a transparent and accountable prison system. CANY respectfully urges the Governor and the Legislature to affirm their shared commitment to transparency and accountability by ensuring the CANY's funding is continued at a level of \$3.127 million annually.

With adequate and stable funding, CANY stands ready to continue fulfilling its statutory mandate—working in partnership with the Executive and the Legislature to ensure that New York's correctional system operates safely, lawfully, and in accordance with the values of dignity, justice, and public trust.