

**Testimony of Damon Rowe, Managing Director of Operations
Greenburger Center for Social and Criminal Justice, Inc.
before the
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection before the
New York Senate Finance Committee and New York State Assembly
Ways and Means Committee**

February 12, 2026

Good morning. Thank you, Chairperson Krueger and Chairperson Pretlow, for the opportunity to present testimony before this Joint Budget Hearing on Public Protection of the New York State Senate Finance Committee and the New York State Assembly Committee on Ways and Means. I am Damon Rowe, Managing Director of Operations at the Greenburger Center for Social and Criminal Justice, Inc. The Center is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation which advocates for needed criminal and social justice reforms.

In particular, the Center focuses on the plight of justice involved people with mental illness. In short, we believe mental illness is a public health issue, not a criminal justice problem. Though today, [according to the Prison Policy Initiative](#), nearly 60% of incarcerated people in state prisons currently live with or have a history of mental illness, yet only 6% are receiving treatment.

In 2014, one of those people was Francis Greenburger's son. Mental illness played a significant role in his arrest and conviction on charges of attempted robbery and arson. Despite exhausting every medical and alternative school option available prior to his son's criminal justice involvement, Mr. Greenburger's son continued to struggle with mental illness and substance abuse and ultimately spent just over two years at Rikers awaiting disposition of his case and two more years incarcerated in upstate prisons after his conviction.

Places like Rikers and prisons are no place for people with mental illness, yet at that time, there was no diversion or treatment program that the District Attorney or Judge would accept as an alternative to incarceration for Mr. Greenburger's son. While it was clear that we would not be able to help his son, the Greenburger Center was founded to develop an Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) model that could safely and effectively treat other people like Mr. Greenburger's son, rather than subject them to incarceration.

After more than 10 years of development, we are proud to say that Hope House on Crotona Park, located in the Bronx, will open in 2026. Hope House is a first of its kind in the nation, ATI for people who currently have no other option to incarceration, due to the level of crime committed and the seriousness of their mental illness. Once open, Hope House will have capacity to serve 16 people, 8 men and 8 women living with serious mental illness and who have plead guilty to certain non-sex related felony crimes.

Before describing the Hope House program in more detail, I want to take this opportunity to thank some members who have supported this project over these many years. Funding and support from the Senate and Assembly, including from Speaker Heastie, former Assembly Members Danny O'Donnell and Michael Blake, and current Assembly Members David Weprin and Erik Dilan as well as Senators Luis Sepulveda and Julia Salazar has been instrumental in developing the Hope House model and constructing the facility. Your financial investment will also make it possible for the State to bring more than a million dollars a year in new federal Medicaid funding to New York state to treat 16 people who would otherwise receive no Medicaid while incarcerated.

Your continued funding to support a portion of Hope House's operating budget is crucial to Hope House's ultimate success. Specifically, support from legislative members Salazar, Sepulveda and Dilan in a total amount of \$300,000 will help support innovative programming at Hope House such as restorative justice and

work-ordered day programming. It will also help secure approximately \$1.2 million a year in federal Medicaid funding; funding as mentioned, which is not otherwise unavailable due to federal policy called the “Inmate Exclusion Rule” which denies Medicaid to incarcerated people.

Once open, Hope House will accept people living with serious mental illness who have plead guilty to a non-sex related felony. Hope House will offer a 1-2 year expected length of stay and provide intensive Medicaid eligible residential and clinical services on site. Our partners, Athena Health will provide clinical and psychiatric services through a NYS Article 31 satellite clinic license and the Greenburger Center will offer restorative residential services via a NYS 595 Congregate Care Residential license issued by the Office of Mental Health.

More specifically, these services will be provided in a trauma informed environment. The residential program, based upon a modified therapeutic community model, will be enhanced by having residents engaged in a work ordered day program, modeled on the Club House International program. This work ordered day program will include skills and life training in cooking, horticulture and job skills.

Athena will provide both group and individual counseling sessions and well as access to a psychiatric prescriber. Physical health care needs will be provided by Community Health Network via both mobile and in person office visits.

Due to the levels of crime committed and serious mental illness, people who voluntarily choose to be diverted to Hope House as part of a plea agreement, entered into with the advice of their defense attorney, will be subject to certain security measures. These security measures, designed to keep the residents, staff and community safe, will include the use of monitoring bracelets; limits on leaving the facility at least within the first 6 months without staff or a peer; and requiring residents to request the imposition of nominal bail to be set by the judge at the time

a plea is taken, which may only be posted by a bond agent retained and trained by Hope House to safely return a client back to court should they decide to voluntarily withdraw from the program or leave the program against medical and program advice.

The Hope House model is supported by judges, all five of New York City's District Attorneys, the defense bar, the NYC Council, families of incarcerated people and many others. We look forward to inviting you all to the ribbon cutting and would be happy to meet with you or your staff to provide a detailed briefing on the model.