

**Testimony of Justin Wood**  
**Director of Policy at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest**  
**New York City Council Committee on Finance**  
**Hearing on the FY23 Executive Budget**  
**May 25, 2022**

Thank you, Chair Brannan and members of the Finance Committee for the opportunity to share testimony on the preliminary FY23 budget.

After two years of budget cuts and austerity amidst the worst public health, environmental, and economic crises in generations, we want to thank Speaker Adams and the City Council for proposing a budget that would move New York away from a harmful cycle of stop-and-start program and staffing cuts, and toward long-term investments in infrastructure, education, and workforce programs necessary to address the root causes of racial and social inequality in our city.

To this end, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) is pleased to offer the following six priorities that we feel are integral to increasing health justice, environmental justice, and disability justice in New York City:

**1. Fully fund the City Council's Immigrant Health Initiative.** NYLPI is privileged to be part of the City Council's Immigrant Health Initiative, and we thank you for that support. During this unprecedented public health crisis, funding for this initiative has allowed us to expand our work and continue to provide critical services to ensure that immigrant New Yorkers have access to healthcare, and we ask that this vital program continue in FY 2023 for both NYLPI and our partners. Since 2017, NYLPI has used this funding to provide free immigration representation, holistic wrap-around services, comprehensive health screenings and organ transplant advocacy for undocumented New Yorkers and people detained in immigration detention facilities and jails.

The Immigrant Health Initiative has allowed us to expand our work and provide legal representation for transgender, gender-nonconforming, intersex (TGNCI) folks and/or HIV+ individuals. For example:

- Last year NYLPI filed an affirmative asylum application for a gender nonconforming individual living in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn who has been perceived as a "gay man." They have suffered past harm by the Venezuelan government and were stabbed because of their sexual identity. We were able to submit their asylum application only days before the deadline, which also made the client eligible to receive critical public benefits, including healthcare.
- Christina, another client living in Corona, Queens, recently received a life-saving kidney transplant after our immigration and health advocacy, thanks to this Council initiative.

**2. Commit to major upfront investments in organic waste recycling, commercial waste reform programs, and infrastructure that advances waste equity and creation of good green jobs.** We are pleased to see full funding for implementation of the Commercial Waste Zones program in the proposed budget, and look forward to working with DSNY, the City Council, and the administration to implement this landmark reform of the sprawling commercial waste system in the coming months.

Major investments in universal curbside compost service and other diversion programs are urgently needed on the residential side. While the restoration of school organic waste collections and limited community drop-off sites in the executive budget are a positive signal, transformation of our landfill- and incinerator-based solid waste system can only begin once the Council and administration mandate a timeline and plan for implementation of a universal, citywide compost program that will achieve economies of scale, robust participation in multifamily buildings, facilitate long-term savings by replacing garbage disposal routes with organics routes, and begin to move the needle on our climate emissions and waste reduction goals.

**3. Make immediate investments in renewable energy, battery storage, and sustainable waste infrastructure on Rikers Island.** The City must move as swiftly and boldly as possible to transform Rikers Island from a deadly and dysfunctional carceral site to a renewable energy, recycling, and jobs hub as mandated by the Renewable Rikers Act of 2021. Moreover, investments in local renewable energy and storage solutions cannot come soon enough as New Yorkers face skyrocketing energy bills and the prospect of a sweltering summer while the downstate electric grid continues to rely on highly polluting and expensive fossil fuel peaker plants clustered in the same communities that suffer from the worst impacts of mass incarceration.

We therefore strongly support the Council's proposal in the FY23 Budget Response to install a large-scale solar array and energy storage on the approximately 50 acres of land on Riker's Island that have already been transferred from Corrections to DCAS. Riker's Island also has great potential for sustainable waste management facilities including composting or anaerobic digestion of organic food waste, far beyond the current limited composting operations for food waste generated by Department of Corrections.

**4. Fully implement Local Law 97 of 2019.**

Recent near-record heat, air quality health advisories, and escalating electric bills are also stark reminders that urban heat island effects, energy burdens, and air pollution are highly unequal burdens that will worsen for low-income communities and communities of color across NYC if we do not take systemic, urgent action.

Weatherization, energy efficiency upgrades, green roofs, and rapid development of local renewable energy resources are among the investments that can mitigate these climate change impacts, while reducing our city's overall greenhouse gas emissions. We echo the Council's call to baseline full funding and staffing for the Office of Building Energy and Emissions Performance (OBEEP) to implement and enforce Local Law 97 of 2019 in the FY23 budget and going forward.

**5. Utilize the \$55 million allocation for B-HEARD to fund the CCIT-NYC non-police mental health crisis response system.**

After nearly a year in business, the City's B-HEARD program, which was intended to be a non-police response to mental health crises, *continues to dispatch police to more than 80% of mental health crisis calls*. For a city where 19 individuals experiencing mental health crises have been killed at the hands of the police in the last seven years alone, B-HEARD continues to present enormous dangers for individuals with mental disabilities.

NYLPI urges full funding for a truly non-police model of the sort proposed by [Correct Crisis Intervention Today – NYC \(CCIT-NYC\)](#) that, unlike B-HEARD, will:

- use the federal 988 hotline rather than the police-run 911 system;
- engage community members and individuals with lived mental health experience in the design, implementation, and oversight of crisis response — most crucially as members of the crisis response teams;
- be available 24/7; and
- have a response time comparable to that of other crises.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony and look forward to working with Speaker Adams and the members of this council to implement a budget that advances our shared vision for a more equitable, sustainable, and thriving New York City.

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*Founded 45 years ago by leaders of the bar, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) is a community-driven civil rights organization that pursues justice for all New Yorkers. NYLPI works toward a New York where all people can thrive in their communities, with quality healthcare and housing, safe jobs, good schools, and healthy neighborhoods. In NYLPI's vision, all New Yorkers live with dignity and independence, with the resources they need to succeed. NYLPI's communitydriven approach powers its commitments to civil rights and to disability, health, immigrant, and environmental justice. NYLPI seeks lasting change through litigation, community organizing, policy advocacy, pro bono service, and education.*