

What the Incoming Mayor Must Do About New York City Jails

Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani can harness the federal court's historic intervention in the local jail system to durably improve it.



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When Zohran Mamdani is sworn in as New York City mayor on January 1, he'll have a chance to champion numerous policies to improve conditions in the New York City jails, including the [notorious Rikers Island](#) [\[link-1\]](#).

Mamdani will inherit a jail system plagued by rampant mismanagement resulting in

[chronic staffing dysfunction](#) [\[link-2\]](#) that breeds [a culture of neglect, abuse, and violence](#) [\[link-3\]](#). And [based on nearly every indicator](#) [\[link-4\]](#), the brutality is getting worse, not better. Over the past decade, there have been at least [116 deaths](#) [\[link-5\]](#), scores of which were [preventable](#) [\[link-6\]](#).

This year alone, 13 people have [died](#) [\[link-7\]](#) in the jails.

But soon the jail system will be under new management: A federal court is poised to [appoint](#) [\[link-8\]](#) an outside administrator wielding broad powers — [a receiver](#) [\[link-9\]](#) — to help run the jails with an eye specific to reducing the violence. Hardly a magic wand, [the receiver](#) [\[link-10\]](#), which the court calls a remediation manager, will answer exclusively to a federal judge with life tenure — not to an elected official, not to a political group, not to the electorate. That sort of independence from political pressure could lead to the elimination of entrenched practices that [fuel](#) [\[link-11\]](#) unsound and unsafe operation.

One important task for the incoming Mamdani administration is establishing a productive and optimal relationship with the remediation manager, something

critical to achieving the type of significant and sustainable jail reform that would be difficult to push through the ordinary political process. The administration should also strive to honor [the legal mandate](#) [\[link-12\]](#) to shutter Rikers, which must include safely shrinking the jail population. It may have greater capacity to close Rikers given the manager's outsize role running the institution.

Embrace the Remediation Manager

When Judge Laura Taylor Swain names a manager to oversee the jails — a decision expected imminently — the manager's explicit task will be implementing [18 long-ignored provisions of court orders](#) [\[link-13\]](#) relating to security, safety, staffing, supervision, and officers' use of force.

The Mamdani administration should embrace the manager for several reasons. First, the manager

will essentially take the city's place in running the jails, which means that a politically unelected and unaccountable official will be exercising the city's managerial authority, expending its taxpayer-funded resources, and overseeing the detention of its residents. How the manager runs the jails will affect other city functions. Second, receivership can help the city tackle the internecine web of structural and political barriers underlying the jails' dysfunction without incurring the resultant political backlash. Third, after the manager's tenure concludes, the city administration will be on the hook to maintain reductions in violence which will necessarily involve deciding whether and to what extent to sustain the manager's reforms. Mamdani should take multiple steps to achieve maximum reform.

Withdraw litigation resisting the manager's appointment

Arguing that it's both capable and willing to put in place court orders to reduce violence, the outgoing mayor's office has fought Swain's [November 2024 ruling](#) [\[link-14\]](#) finding the city in civil contempt as well her [May 2025 decision](#) [\[link-15\]](#) remediating the contempt through mandating appointment of a manager. But the city's arguments hold no sway. Both decisions rest on almost a decade's worth of thorough, credible, and in some respects, incontrovertible [evidence](#) [\[link-16\]](#) reflecting a sustained [pattern](#) [\[link-17\]](#) of noncompliance with various legal obligations as part of the consent decree in [Nunez v. City of New York](#) [\[link-18\]](#). And both opinions are legally sound, consistent with [governing judicial precedent](#) [\[link-19\]](#) and [federal statutory law](#) [\[link-20\]](#).

Petition to weigh in on the manager selection processes and negotiate

the receivership's terms

Violent conditions demand the manager's swift selection and appointment. Yet if Swain hasn't finalized the receivership's terms and appointed a manager by Inauguration Day, his administration should seek to have a say in those determinations. The long-term success of correctional receivership hinges on the government's buy-in. Collaborating with the new administration to make slight tweaks to the receivership design could help secure durable reform.

Appoint a collaborative correction commissioner

The manager will have expansive powers, but, under Swain's terms, must share operational control with a correction commissioner named by the mayor. The correction commissioner must have substantial management experience to marshal the respect

of jail staff. Ideally, the commissioner will also have qualifications that would complement and optimize the manager's work including experience in implementing and sustaining effective reforms in correctional settings, particularly in reducing deaths; a track record of collaboration with stakeholders within a complex organization; and an ability to think creatively. Further, because Swain is [seeking](#) [\[link-21\]](#) a manager with "expertise developed outside of [the New York City jails]," the ideal candidate for correction commissioner can help the manager navigate New York politics to minimize the manager's learning curve.

Safely Reduce the Jail Population and Close Rikers Island

In 2019, the New York City Council [voted](#) [\[link-22\]](#) to permanently close and replace Rikers with four

smaller, more modern jails with 4,160 beds throughout the city. However, since 2020, the population in the jail has risen and the plan is years behind schedule and billions over budget. At this point, fulfilling the closure mandate, as the mayor-elect acknowledges, will be “[functionally impossible](#) [\[link-23\]](#).” But Mayor-elect Mamdani is also right that the incoming administration should still [strive](#) [\[link-24\]](#) “to do everything in [its] power to try and meet that deadline.” And because the manager will be assisting the city in running the jails, the new administration might have extra governance capacity to do so.

The new administration should work with the city council to accelerate the construction process, and, if necessary, chart a new course for construction with a more reasonable timeline. It should also phase out the Anna M. Kross Center, a jail on Rikers that is

already minimally used. Doing so would signal to the public the administration’s commitment to shuttering the complex. It is critical to explore tapping into emergency capital funds to address unanticipated construction costs and expedite the transition. Finally, the administration should appoint leaders throughout the administration (including the [two newly codified Rikers closure coordinators](#) [\[link-25\]](#)) as well as create a centralized hub, like the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, to harmonize the various strands of closure and receivership processes.

Perhaps most important for closing Rikers is reducing the current city jail population, which [hovers around 7,000 people](#) [\[link-26\]](#). Fewer people behind bars can make it easier to deliver basic services, improve safety for both incarcerated people and staff, and save taxpayer dollars.

Specifically, the administration should tap into the rich expertise in the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice to expand effective, data-driven, community-based interventions — such as diversion, intensive case management, mental health and substance use treatment, transitional and supportive housing, and reentry initiatives — to address the drivers of unnecessary incarceration without impacting public safety.

[Ways to expand](#) [link-27] many of these efforts include broadening eligibility, simplifying application processes, widening geographic range with emphasis on the most distressed areas, prioritizing implementation of measures for which funding has already been allocated, and dedicating still more funding to them.

To take just one example, [Project Reset](#) [link-28] is a pre-arraignment diversion initiative that steers people convicted of low-level and

nonviolent offenses from jail. After completing programming, a participant's arrest record will be sealed and they will avoid prosecution. But Project Reset is dramatically limited, despite its effectiveness, as my colleagues [have pointed out](#) [link-29]. From its 2018 launch to September 2020, 96 percent of participants completed Project Reset's programming but it [served just 2,149 people](#) [link-30] — less than 1 percent of all the city's [low-level offense cases](#) [link-31] filed during that time frame.

The administration should also scale up structural tools that can result in the safe release of people. For example, New York Correction Law 6-A [authorizes](#) [link-32] the correction commissioner to release people serving a sentence of one year or less to complete their sentence in the community under certain circumstances. From 2022 to 2024, the correction

commissioner relied on 6-A authority to release 115 people and [only 6 were rearrested](#) [link-33]. The administration should similarly ensure the city's [Local Conditional Release Commission](#) [link-34] is prudently operating at peak statutory authority. And the new mayor's office must guarantee the robust and full implementation of [comprehensive jail population review](#) [link-35].

Moreover, as the city moves to replace Rikers, while the administration should continue researching the lives and experiences of city residents caught up in the legal system to drive policy solutions that prevent unnecessary incarceration, it should also dedicate increasingly more research capacity to understudied aspects of the jail experience to help guide the transition to the new jails — primarily, to prevent exportation of

the violent culture that has long troubled Rikers — and identify still new ways to keep people out of the jails.

Finally, recognizing that [more than half](#) [link-36] the jail population has a mental health diagnosis, the administration should ensure that mental health screenings completed upon jail intake are timely. It should also increase the number of specialized jail housing units for people with serious mental health issues and fund more local residential treatment beds. However, the mayor-elect should strive to limit incarceration of people with mental health needs as the jails are not best-suited to dispense such care.

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By following these steps to embrace the remediation manager and work toward the closure of Rikers, the Mamdani administration can assiduously support immediate

improvements and enduring reform
in the city's troubled jail system.

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Links

link-1: notorious Rikers Island <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/whats-next-federal-court-takeover-rikers-island>

link-2: chronic staffing dysfunction <https://www.nydailynews.com/2025/11/05/nyc-jail-oversight-board-details-staff-breakdowns-five-2025-jail-deaths/>

link-3: a culture of neglect, abuse, and violence [tps://nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/DE%20846%20Nunez%20-%20Opinion%20and%20Order%20Regarding%20Appointment%20of%20a%20Nunez%20Remediation%20Manager.pdf?inline=1](https://nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/DE%20846%20Nunez%20-%20Opinion%20and%20Order%20Regarding%20Appointment%20of%20a%20Nunez%20Remediation%20Manager.pdf?inline=1)

link-4: based on nearly every indicator <https://dmmr.nyc.gov/city-services/public-safety-and-access-to-justice/departments-of-correction>

link-5: 116 deaths <https://tillidgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2025-05-22-Monitors-Report.pdf?inline=1>

link-6: preventable <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/14/nyregion/rikers-island-inmate-suicide-deaths-federal-takeover.html>

link-7: died <https://www.nydailynews.com/2025/11/21/man-held-on-rikers-island-dies-13th-jail-related-death-in-2025/>

link-8: appoint <https://www.nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/DE%20846%20Nunez%20-%20Opinion%20and%20Order%20Regarding%20Appointment%20of%20a%20Nunez%20Remediation%20Manager.pdf?inline=1>

link-9: a receiver <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/receiverships-jails-and-prisons-explained>

link-10: the receiver <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/way-forward-rikers-island-receivership>

link-11: fuel <https://www.nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/Nunez%20-%20Contempt%20OpOrd.pdf?inline=1>

link-12: the legal mandate <https://climate.law.columbia.edu/sites/climate.law.columbia.edu/files/content/Local%20Law%2016.pdf?inline=1>

link-13: 18 long-ignored provisions of court orders <https://www.nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/Nunez%20-%20Contempt%20OpOrd.pdf?inline=1>

link-14: November 2024 ruling <https://www.nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/Nunez%20-%20Contempt%20OpOrd.pdf?inline=1>

link-15: May 2025 decision <https://www.nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/DE%20846%20Nunez%20-%20Opinion%20and%20Order%20Regarding%20Appointment%20of%20a%20Nunez%20Remediation%20Manager.pdf?inline=1>

link-16: evidence <https://tillidgroup.com/projects/nunez-monitorship/>

link-17: pattern <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/boc/downloads/pdf/First-Report-and-Recommendations-on-2025-Deaths-in-NYC-DOC-Custody-with-DOC-and-CHS-responses.pdf?inline=1>

link-18: Nunez v. City of New York <https://clearinghouse.net/case/12072/>

link-19: governing judicial preceden <https://clearinghouse.net/doc/24747/>

link-20: federal statutory law <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1997e>

link-21: seeking <https://www.nysd.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/2025-05/DE%20846%20Nunez%20-%20Opinion%20and%20Order%20Regarding%20Appointment%20of%20a%20Nunez%20Remediation%20Manager.pdf?inline=1>

link-22: voted <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3983008&GUID=33061BE9-BD8C-4F5A-8165-AD3DFD0BFDF0&Options=&Search=>

link-23: functionally impossible <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2025/10/02/rikers-island-challenge-next-mayor>

link-24: strive <https://www.corrections1.com/rikers-correctional-facility/what-nyc-mayor-elect-zohran-mamdani-public-safety-agenda-could-mean-for-rikers>

link-25: two newly codified Rikers closure coordinators <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7290841&GUID=7ACDB1AE-2BDC-43BA-9AB1-C2DB2B54D942&Options=ID%7CText%7C&Search=1242>

link-26: hovers around 7,000 people <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/services/for-the-public/department-of-correction-doc/dashboard/>

link-27: Ways to expand <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/improving-misdemeanor-enforcement>

link-28: Project Reset <https://www.projectreset.nyc/>

link-29: have pointed out <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/improving-misdemeanor-enforcement>

link-30: served just 2,149 people https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA2400/RRA2473-1/RAND_RRA2473-1.pdf?inline=1

link-31: low-level offense cases <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/misdemeanor-enforcement-trends-new-york-city-2016-2022>

link-32: authorizes <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/COR/A6-A>

link-33: only 6 were rearrested https://council.nyc.gov/press/wp-content/uploads/sites/56/2025/04/rikers-commitments_041625-1.pdf?inline=1

link-34: Local Conditional Release Commission <https://www.nyc.gov/site/probation/crc/about-crc.page>

link-35: comprehensive jail population review <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5898984&GUID=0AF717C9-7ECB-481C-8EC0-75E072E2025A&Options=Text%7C&Search=jail>

link-36: more than half <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2025/doc.pdf?inline=1>