

Organizations, Individuals From Across the Country Oppose Mayor Eric Adams' Plan to Increase Involuntary Commitment of New Yorkers with Mental Disabilities

December 12, 2022 – Today 298 organizations and individuals from across the United States issued a joint statement opposing New York Mayor Eric Adams' plan to sweep New York's streets and subways of people with mental disabilities.

Last month, Mayor Adams announced a new directive to New York's police officers, EMTs, and street outreach workers to transport individuals to psychiatric hospitals involuntarily when it appears that they cannot "meet their basic needs." The Mayor provided as examples individuals who are "mumbling," "shadow boxing," or merely standing on the street for too long.

The joint statement raises a number of concerns with the Mayor's plan, including the lack of evidence that involuntary court-ordered treatment is any more effective at helping people with mental disabilities live successfully in the community than engagement in the voluntary services, like help finding and maintaining a home, that people want and need. The statement also notes that people who are involuntarily committed are less likely to disclose suicidal feelings, and more likely to commit suicide.

"We firmly reject the Mayor's proposed expansion of coercive approaches that will actually harm people experiencing mental health crises by increasing the use of traumatizing, involuntary treatment," said Harvey Rosenthal, Executive Director of the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitative Services (NYAPRS) and a board member of the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, which helped organize the joint statement. "We cannot hospitalize ourselves out of the problems faced by the mentally ill, nor can we force more people into the same services that have already repeatedly failed them. Instead, our leaders must triple our investments in the outreach, peer support, housing first, and rehabilitation programs that are in the process of being rolled out by the City and State."

According to the statement, "Black and brown people with disabilities are overrepresented in the population of individuals experiencing homelessness, and so are more likely to be involuntarily hospitalized under the Mayor's plan—or may be subjected to traumatizing and dangerous interactions with law enforcement that have resulted in serious harm, including death."

"Why is it that when someone has a medical issue an ambulance comes to help, but when you have a mental health issue, the police get involved?" asked Jalyn Radziminski of the Bazelon Center. "Mental health systems should provide services that help people avoid the attention of the police, and mental health workers, not the police, should engage people in connecting to the community-based services they want. Not only is this safer and more effective, but it also advances civil rights and avoids incarceration, institutionalization, and coercion."

The statement notes that Mayor Adams' plan is one of a number of troubling actions this year, at the federal level and in other states, that target people with mental disabilities to promote public safety—despite the consistent evidence that less than five percent of

violence is committed by people with mental health conditions, and that such individuals are far more likely to be victims of violent crime than perpetrators of it.

“We know that people with a mental health diagnosis, especially BIPOC community members, face a greater risk of being physically harmed or worse during interactions with the police, said Marlene Sallo, executive director of the National Disability Rights Network. “Mayor Adam’s approach to involuntarily hospitalize unhoused individuals with a mental health diagnosis fails to address the chronic lack of housing and the ongoing need to invest in community-based supports and services that we know work. We oppose this return to the awful days of institutionalization in New York and wherever we see this short-sighted and cruel approach.”

“We are sorry to see another state resort to backward policies that hurt people with disabilities,” said Andy Imparato, executive director of Disability Rights California. “We fought this year against increased involuntary commitment in our state, through the new ‘Care Courts’ program. These programs will inevitably harm and stigmatize people with mental disabilities, especially people within communities of color and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.”

Signers of the joint statement join New York advocates “in calling on the Mayor and their Governor to reject an expansion of involuntary commitment, and instead to develop a comprehensive plan to provide homeless New Yorkers with disabilities the housing and voluntary services they want and need.”

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