The State of the Judiciary 2025

Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson

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COURT OF APPEALS · STATE OF NEW YORK

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The State of the Judiciary 2025

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STATE OF NEW YORK
UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM

Opening Remarks

Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson

Last year, I delivered a State of the Judiciary address that was unorthodox in both format and content. I shared the podium with several New Yorkers who, though charged with serious criminal offenses, had stories with happy endings because of their diversion into some of our more than 340 "problem-solving courts." They had been diverted away from incarceration and into productive and fulfilling lives, giving back to their communities by helping others with similar troubles.

From their stories, and from the generally spectacular results of problem-solving courts statewide, I drew my unorthodox message: that all of New York's courts should consider themselves problem solvers. I urged those of us privileged to serve from the bench to ask "what decision is best," not merely "which party is right"—to think about the courts as similar to our other branches of government: institutions that attempt to make decisions that will improve the lives of those we serve.

Support for transformation of our courts into problem solvers was also the major focus of the Unified Court System's budget request last year. We sought and received funding for the enhancement and expansion of our long-neglected Family Courts, which deal with delicate situations involving the safety and success of children and families, as well as funding to augment specialty courts throughout the state, including court services for emerging adults and mental health court participants.

More broadly, last year's highlights extend to areas as diverse as expansion of e-filing statewide; landmark legislation to help keep judges safe amidst rising threats; expansion of our Communications Department with a focus on informing and engaging the public; creation of a Division of Alternative Dispute Resolution; deployment of an Equal Justice Coordinator in each judicial district; modernization of criminal courtrooms around the state in partnership with district attorneys' offices; training and graduation of four classes of new court officers; and piloting an advanced platform for virtual court appearances. For those who want to see what our Division of Court Modernization has accomplished, we are posting as an accompaniment to the State of the Judiciary an 8-minute video capturing highlights statewide.

I thank the Governor and the Legislature for their continued partnership with the judiciary, and for their thoughtful consideration of and engagement with the programmatic requests in our budget. We at the Unified Court System are fortunate to collaborate with coordinate branches of government that recognize the need to support alternatives to the

traditional paradigms, so that together we can provide better results for all New Yorkers. My leadership team and I, as well as the judges and the thousands of dedicated employees of the Unified Court System, have been hard at work to bring our courts out of the past and into the future.

But the past, not the future, better describes our criminal justice system today. The basic model: identify, apprehend and punish the wrongdoer, is the approach we inherited from Europe, and dates back to the Codes of Hammurabi and Ur-Nammu. Mercifully, we no longer put the heads of criminals on spikes, or cut off the hands of thieves, but let's consider how well the traditional model is working.

The United States leads the world in the total number of people incarcerated: there are about 2 million people in our jails and prisons. We have 5% of the world's total population, but about 20% of the world's prison population.

We are a world leader in incarceration rate per capita. Every single U.S. state incarcerates more people per capita than almost any other democracy on earth. New York State has a higher per capita incarceration rate than Russia.

What do we know about the people who are incarcerated? According to the American Psychological Association, 54% of those incarcerated in state prisons have mental health issues, as do 64% of those held in jails. According to Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, more than half of New York's jail population in 2021 had a mental health diagnosis. We also know that our penal system is ill-equipped to provide mental health services to incarcerated people, and incarceration itself most often exacerbates existing or creates new mental health issues.

Racial and ethnic disparities also plague the current model. The felony conviction rate is significantly higher for New Yorkers of color than their white peers. According to data tracked by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, these disparities persist through felony sentencing. As a result, although African Americans comprise about 18% of New York's general population, they make up nearly half of our prison population. Those identifying as Hispanic or Latino are also overrepresented in the prison population.

The incarcerated population is also getting older due to longer sentences. In 2007, the average minimum sentence for incarcerated New Yorkers was just under nine years. In 2021, it was four years longer, just under 13 years. And although abundant research shows that criminality declines as people age, New York's prison population is getting older and older. In 2008, only 12 percent of incarcerated people in New York were over 50. In 2021, the percentage over 50 had doubled, to nearly a quarter of those in New York prisons.

What do we get from all this incarceration? It doesn't make us safer. Studies have shown that as our prison population went up, the crime rate also rose. The United States has one of the highest recidivism rates worldwide—at least double that of many European countries, where a combination of rehabilitation-focused policies and social reintegration efforts contributes to lower rearrest rates.

Our high level of incarceration is tremendously costly. According to Comptroller DiNapoli, the annual cost to incarcerate one person in New York more than quadrupled in the last decade: from an annual cost of $81,000 in 2011 to more than $250,000 in 2021. And those numbers account only for the portion of costs covered by the annual DOCCS budget; if you also add in other state costs like benefits and pensions for DOCCS staff, the annual cost per incarcerated person, in 2021, was well over half a million dollars, or about $1500 per incarcerated person per day.

The direct monetary cost of incarceration does not begin to capture the vast social and economic costs, which include disrupted families and communities; myriad barriers to employment and education; a reduction in lifetime earnings; the permanent loss of voting rights; and the ubiquitous stigma of a criminal conviction—costs disproportionately borne by low-income communities, which reverberate through generations.

Put simply, our criminal justice system isn't working. Maybe it hasn't really ever worked. Prolonged incarceration is very expensive, and it does not make us safer. It entrenches poverty, perpetuates cycles of violence, and harms many of the New Yorkers we are trying to protect and serve.

Some scholars liken New York's criminal justice system to a highway that ends at incarceration. Affordable housing and adequate community services might allow someone to exit the highway safely at Exit 1, before any interaction with law enforcement or the courts. Treatment services for mental health and substance use disorders might help someone get off at Exit 2, before an arrest and criminal charges. Our problem-solving courts might help someone get off at Exit 3, whether before or after conviction. As public servants operating parts of New York's criminal justice system, our job is to help as many people safely exit the highway as possible—safely for themselves and for the public—and the earlier along the road they can exit safely, the better.

But what should lie at the end of the highway: when an individual has missed all the exits—has been arrested, charged, convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated. How, then, does a just and effective criminal justice system respond?

You might ask, what does overincarceration have to do with the courts—isn't that an issue for the other branches of government to resolve? I have two answers: first, separation of powers does not mean that the three branches of government cannot work together to

better society. All three branches of New York's government worked to create and implement the Clean Slate Act, which provides that eligible conviction records will be sealed when certain conditions are met, enabling persons convicted of crimes a better chance for safe reintegration into society. And all three branches are working with the Center for Justice Innovation to reimagine Family Court and the ways in which families in distress receive help from the State, including when there is involvement with the criminal justice system.

Second, overincarceration has everything to do with the courts. No prosecutor, jury, legislator or executive branch official imposed a prison sentence; everyone sentenced to a New York prison was sentenced by a judge of the Unified Court System.

In pursuit of last year's theme of enhanced diversion, the Unified Court System has been working to refine legislation sponsored by Senator Ramos and Assemblymember Souffrant Forrest, to expand diversion and treatment programs for people with mental health disorders and other disabilities. And in pursuit of this year's theme, we are working to refine legislation colloquially called the "Second Look Act," sponsored by Senator Julia Salazar and Assemblymember Latrice Walker, which would allow those serving long prison sentences to demonstrate to a judge that their continued incarceration is no longer justified. As Chief Administrative Judge Zayas wrote in the Law Journal last month, "many people . . . who commit crimes are not incorrigible, or beyond the capacity for change and redemption. They may have been young and reckless and in the wrong place at the wrong time, or addicted to drugs, or suffering from an untreated mental illness." Both of those pieces of legislation fundamentally embody the problem-solving ethos we want to instill deeply in the courts of our State. They propose human-centric, community-oriented solutions that have the potential simultaneously to reduce crime and save taxpayer dollars.

As was the case last year, my introductory remarks are the least important part of today's program. We will all have a far greater appreciation of the problems and solutions after hearing from today's guests: Daniel F. Martuscello III, the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision; Christopher Martinez, who has served 23 years in prison and remains incarcerated; Mujahideen Muhammad, who served 24-and-a-half years in prison and was released 10 months ago; Jarrell Daniels, who served six years in prison and was released in 2018; and Tami Eldridge, who has served 25 years in prison and remains incarcerated. Mr. Martinez, Mr. Muhammad, Mr. Daniels and Ms. Eldridge all were convicted of very serious crimes. Mr. Martinez and Ms. Eldridge, who remain incarcerated with no end in sight, are here through the extraordinary and unprecedented efforts of Commissioner Martuscello and his staff.

Program

Commissioner Martuscello began his career with the then-New York State Department of Correctional Services in May 1997, as a Corrections Officer. Over the years he has held a variety of roles at the Department. In 2023, he assumed oversight of the Department as Acting Commissioner, and was subsequently nominated by Governor Hochul and confirmed by the New York State Senate with overwhelming support as Commissioner last May. He is the first former Corrections Officer to ever be appointed Commissioner.

During my visits to prisons, whenever the Commissioner's name came up, whether I was speaking to an incarcerated person or a DOCCS employee, the uniform sentiment was that Commissioner Martuscello is unlike any other Commissioner they have known. He is an unrelenting ally in the cause to enhance public safety by focusing on rehabilitation to reduce incarceration, enhance the prospect for social integration, and decrease recidivism.

DOCCS Commissioner Daniel F. Martuscello III

Remarks of Daniel F. Martuscello III, DOCCS Commissioner

Good afternoon, I am Daniel Martuscello, Commissioner of the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. I would like to thank Chief Judge Wilson for having me here today to highlight our partnership and discuss some of the work being done in the correctional and judicial systems. It is truly an honor to speak at this momentous occasion and hear about the state and future of New York's judiciary.

The judiciary and DOCCS are important pillars of the state's criminal justice system. As a department, we strive to fulfill our responsibility with respect and humanity, while ensuring the individuals under our care have access to opportunities to better themselves and prepare for their eventual return to the community. Despite these efforts, we make mistakes, and no mistake is more tragic than the recent murder of Robert Brooks, who sadly lost his life following an assault by staff at Marcy Correctional Facility. As I'm sure many of you have seen in the videos, the actions of those staff members were repugnant and do not represent our values as an agency. I have always said that individuals go to prison as punishment, not for punishment, and I will not normalize violence within our facilities. The Department is moving forward by working closely with prosecutors to hold those involved accountable and embarking on a cultural transformation focused on accountability, transparency, and integrity.

Upon assuming my role as Commissioner, I wrote to staff and the incarcerated population to outline my vision for the agency. I told those under our care that I believe in rehabilitation and redemption, and that I believe in them. I committed to find new and innovative ways to harness their lived experiences so that we may tell their story. Their voices and experiences can help educate and shape the future of youth who live in the same neighborhoods, walk the same paths, and have the same struggles as those who become entangled in the criminal justice system, so that they may avoid making those same mistakes. I also challenged those who have found the path to redemption to spread the message amongst their peers. At every graduation ceremony I attend, I challenge each of the graduates to pull their peers from the yard to the classroom so that they may engage in rehabilitative programming and transform themselves. Only together can we reach enough people to achieve systemic change and improve people's lives.

We as a department must recognize that we cannot do this work alone. We are fortunate to have a robust network of service providers and volunteers dedicated to providing programming in our facilities. I have committed myself to engage with these organizations and the formerly incarcerated to not only enhance programming, but also offer a message of hope to show that life does not end with incarceration. We have a renewed focus on breaking down barriers for formerly incarcerated to come back to our facilities and engage the population as credible messengers so that they may see that transformation is possible and attainable.

There are countless individuals under our care who are doing extraordinary things to transform themselves and their peers every day, whether they are obtaining their GED, receiving certification in a vocational trade, mentoring younger individuals, or achieving a college degree. It is important that these people are seen and heard so that they may share their journey with those who have walked a similar path and have the same lived

experiences. Through this lens, we can begin to change the narrative so that those impacted by the criminal justice system may be defined by the person they are today and the totality of their experiences, rather than the worst mistake of their lives.

The Department is taking critical steps with the support of the Governor, legislature, and our partners to provide positive incentives to those willing to do the hard work of self-transformation. Governor Hochul's Executive Budget seeks to grant DOCCS authority to make additional programs eligible for earned time benefits – such as Merit Time and Limited Credit Time Allowance – and adds funding to establish job training programs in green energy. These new initiatives will supplement our efforts to expand educational and vocational offerings. Following the restoration of TAP for incarcerated students, college programming continues to expand to additional facilities and students. I have witnessed the power of education firsthand. At one of our college graduations, the valedictorian of the class, who is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole, delivered a message of hope that his son, who was sitting in the audience, may follow the path he is currently leading, rather than the one that resulted in his incarceration. These stories have an impact you cannot measure, one that breaks the cycles of incarceration that have impacted far too many communities for far too long.

The Department is also focusing heavily on vocational training. We have launched new CDL Driver, Auto Technician, and Heavy Equipment Operator programs, which are in high demand in the community, and are collaborating with the Department of Labor and trade unions to provide industry-recognized credentials and college credits for completion of vocational programming. We hired Employment Parole Officers who are focused on workforce development and connecting releasees with employment. This year, we achieved a recidivism rate of 19 percent, which is the lowest rate on record, although I prefer to think of this in a more positive light, that over 80 percent of releasees were successful in the community. Better reentry outcomes mean safer streets, less victimization, and reduced incarceration.

The Department is facing numerous challenges, including learning and growing from our own mistakes, and we shall meet these challenges and the broader challenges that face the criminal justice system and the State of New York. I hope and expect we can count on the continued support of our partners in the judiciary and Chief Judge Wilson as we move forward and work together to create a fairer and more equitable system and state.

It is now my honor to introduce our next speaker, Mr. Christopher Martinez, an incarcerated person currently assigned to the Shawangunk Correctional Facility, a maximum-security facility in Ulster County. Mr. Martinez is serving a sentence for a crime he committed at the age of 17, but Chris is so much more than his crime and sentence. He is

a college graduate, and a fellow SUNY alum I might add, he is a husband, a father, and a role model to his children and his peers. He represents everything I have described here today about the power of redemption and transformation, and I am grateful for his work to better himself and our system. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Christopher Martinez.

Christopher Martinez, who has served 23 years in prison and remains incarcerated, smiles as he is introduced by DOCCS Commissioner Daniel F. Martuscello III

Remarks of Christopher Martinez

Good afternoon. To the esteemed members of the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches and special guests: my name is Christopher Martinez, and I thank you and Commissioner Martuscello for affording me the opportunity to speak and share my story.

Twenty-nine words. "[Y]ou're a very dangerous person and you need to be removed from society for a long period of time, and I am going to make sure that you are." At my sentencing, these 29 words followed my conviction for crimes of murder in the second degree, assault, and weapons possession. I was 17 years old when I committed these crimes, and I was sentenced to 65 years to life—a de facto life without parole sentence. I am still serving my sentence at Shawangunk Correctional Facility.

When I was sentenced, I was a high school dropout, who never had the chance to vote, obtain a driver's license, serve on a jury panel or pay taxes. And I may never have those chances. I was born on the bottom of the map and on the last day of the year: Brooklyn's Coney Island Hospital on New Year's Eve 1984. I was raised in poverty—by parents who were addicted to drugs. As a child, I was shuffled between five homes and attended seven

schools. I was an unknown passenger on the school-to-prison pipeline. I spent some of my childhood in East New York, Brooklyn, which at one point averaged one homicide every 63 hours—that's what I knew as a child. But I didn't know I was encountering and interacting in the community as a subject—as a ward of the state through family court and welfare services. I did not know stops on the pipeline included the Brooklyn Public Library, or the eight colleges and one law school located in Brooklyn. So I stayed in the pipeline until prison.

Was I, a 17-year-old, first time offender, incorrigible? Was I beyond redemption and rehabilitation? What did the judge see in me that made him order a sentence that I could not survive? Maturing into adulthood in prison was a dark time for me—the constant exposure to violence: street violence, family violence, prison violence caused me to turn the violence inwardly, and so I once contemplated suicide. I just didn't know if I was capable of surviving to see my first parole board, in March of 2049.

I have now served 23 years of my sentence. I have spent that time trying to make sense of my punishment, to effect meaning of it. And someone once told me: "Hope manifests itself as light in the midst of darkness." For me, hope has manifested itself in the form of education.

In June of 2019, my life changed again, this time with fourteen words: "Congratulations, Christopher Martinez. You have earned honor roll. Come up and get your degree." On that day, I became a first-generation graduate. I also became a part of the nearly 3 million SUNY alumni, and not merely one of the millions of justice-impacted in our country. Then in 2023, I went on to earn a bachelor's degree, with a concentration in Sociology, through Mount Saint Mary College, once again graduating cum laude.

My son Xzavier was 3 years old when I graduated, and while he may not have understood or remember the graduation, for me, it was one of the few times I felt relief from my punishment. Watching Xzavier enjoy the moment reminded me of the book of Deuteronomy: "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the father." For the first time, at my graduation, I felt like my family wasn't being punished for my sins.

I have not incurred a single disciplinary infraction in 23 years. It is not because I am perfect or even follow every single rule, which I think would be almost impossible. Instead, it is because of mutual respect, because I have devoted myself to the ideas of redemption and rehabilitation, to proving that I can be a productive member of a community, to proving that others can live safely around me. Today, I am one of many creating a new pipeline: a school-to-prison-to-college pipeline—that serves community interests, rather than taxing resources; that sounds on the principles of community building through mentorship, restoration, and trust.

I do not know if I will ever leave Shawangunk. Yet, every day, I work to find meaning and repair the harm I've caused. I remain a devoted husband to my wife Rebekah, who I fell in love with and married ten years ago. I strive to be the best father to my sons, 23-year-old Christopher Jr., five-year-old Xzavier, and one-year-old Xzander.

Being able to take these few minutes to explain my journey gives me immeasurable hope, if not for myself then for others, that New York's motto "Excelsior"—"ever upward"—is possible for all citizens, even those who once committed terrible offenses.

I leave you with this: if there be an occasion for you to look at the State Seal, pause for a moment to consider Lady Justice. She holds both a sword and the scales of justice. I have hope, especially because of today's event, that we can refine how Lady Justice uses her sword—that we can work to redraw the line at imposing punishment that is sufficient but not greater than necessary. Thank you.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

It is important to remember that all humans from time to time do something wrong. I sometimes come to the wrong conclusion in a case; thankfully, I have colleagues and law clerks to keep me from most of my mistakes. Mr. Martinez surely did something very wrong. But that isn't the question before us. The question is whether the judge who sentenced Mr. Martinez might have been wrong when he decided that the actions of a 17-year-old required a sentence rendering Mr. Martinez ineligible for release until he was 82 years old. And when we think about the question in a problem-solving way, can we disregard the effect of Mr. Martinez's lifetime incarceration on his children? What is the right outcome now?

Thank you, Mr. Martinez.

It is my pleasure to invite to the podium Mr. Sean Pica, who is President of a nonprofit organization whose business is bringing higher education to the men and women incarcerated in New York State prisons and supporting them when they are released. Between refurbishing dilapidated houses in Ossining and driving his white box truck around New York State to help recently released individuals move into their first apartments, I'm not sure when he has time to sleep. The passion and joy with which Mr. Pica approaches his work of serving incarcerated men and women is deeply personal: for a crime he committed at age 16, he was sentenced to 24 years in prison, of which he served 16. I present Mr. Sean Pica, who will introduce our next speaker.

Introduction by Sean Pica

Good afternoon. I am Sean Pica, the President of Hudson Link for Higher Education. Hudson Link brings associate's and bachelor's degree programs to men and women in prison. Our students do the same coursework and meet the same requirements as their counterparts on campus. Anyone who dreams of going to college can do it with Hudson Link. We don't screen people out based on their crime or their time.

The results are stunning. We currently have over 450 students enrolled in five correctional facilities across the state. Our nearly 2,000 alumni have a recidivism rate of less than 2%, compared to an estimated 68% across the country. And we do all this for less than $5,000 per student per year, significantly less than what it costs to incarcerate a person in New York State.

Over the last 26 years, Hudson Link has also grown in the number of services it provides. Our Finish Line program supports alumni interested in completing their degree or continuing their education after release. Through our New Beginnings initiative, we purchase and renovate dilapidated houses within walking distance of our office in Ossining, which Hudson Link operates as a temporary housing for returning program alumni, free of charge. Hudson Link alumni are engaged in the renovation of these properties, working side-by-side with trade professionals to gain real-world work experience. We just opened our fourth house this month. We also run a clothing boutique and a furniture warehouse where our alumni can pick out clothes and furniture, free of charge, when they return home.

Hudson Link's success is deeply personal to me. When I was 16 years old, I was sentenced to 24 years in prison, and I believed my life was over. Along with 15 other men at Sing Sing, I got my degree in 2001 through a small program that is now Hudson Link. I had no idea that one day I would be the President of that college program, now run and more than 70% staffed by formerly incarcerated people, whose graduates prove every day what they can do with a college degree.

It is my privilege to now introduce to you a very special Hudson Link graduate: Mr. Mujahideen Muhammad, who returned home 5 months ago. I first met him while he was still incarcerated and a college student in our program, and I was immediately convinced that he was going to be successful. Being a college student is challenging even in the best circumstances, and the challenges are far greater when you're in a maximum-security prison. But Mr. Muhammad always worked so hard—above and beyond the curve—on his course work. And it did not end there—he was a leader inside and always did everything he could to make sure his fellow students were doing as well as he was. No one left behind!

Mujahideen Muhammad, who served 24-and-a-half years in prison and was released 10 months ago

Remarks of Mujahideen Muhammad

My name is Mujahideen Muhammad. I am here today to tell you about my experience spending two thirds of my life incarcerated.

I'll start from the beginning. Drug addiction and mental illness plagued my family. When I was young, my father abandoned me, my mother and two sisters. Then, my mother abandoned us too, for five years, as she struggled with drug addiction. I developed a conduct disorder, due in large part to my lack of attachment to a caregiver. At 14, I was arrested for attempted robbery and sentenced to 12 months in a juvenile residential facility. My values were so poor that I turned a 12-month sentence into a four-year stay. I spent my last year at Harlem Valley Juvenile Residential Facility, where I spent nine months in an isolation unit because of my unruly behavior. It was one of the darkest periods of my life because I adapted to being distant from others; my regard for myself and for other people plummeted. When I was released, it was only because I was sentenced as a juvenile, so when I turned 18, the institution could no longer lawfully hold me. Thus, I was released into society more prone to committing crime than I was before. A year later, at the age of 19, I was arrested for murder and sentenced to 25 years to life.

While awaiting trial on Rikers Island, I fell into great despair and lost all hope. I soon started to lose a grip on my mental health. Over the next several years, I was hospitalized on three occasions. My turning point was 2014. By then, I had been imprisoned for 15 years and

I finally reached the point where I was completely dissatisfied with myself. So, I decided to better myself by pursuing a higher education. I had displayed academic excellence when I was young, but my behavioral issues and values kept me from realizing my educational potential.

In 2017, while at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, I entered Hudson Link's Mercy University College program. Six years later, I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Behavioral Science. I was the salutatorian with a 3.98 GPA. Six months later, I entered New York Theological Seminary and graduated in June 2024 with a Master's degree in Professional Studies. I had a 4.0 GPA. Because of my participation in positive programs and my educational achievements, I made my first parole board in December 2023. I was released from Sing Sing in April 2024 after spending 24-and-a-half years in prison. Two months later, I walked back into Sing Sing as a visitor—a free man—to graduate with my cohorts in my Master's program.

In addition to its intrinsic value, my education prepared me for release in a way I hadn't anticipated: it connected me to a community of support. Hudson Link accepted me into their transitional housing in Ossining, and I benefited from the help of their wonderful staff and wrap-around services. Two weeks into my reentry, my college English professor Mikki Shaw got me my first job at a mushroom farm in Peekskill. A month into my release, my former psychology professor, Dr. Geraldine Downey, hired me as a research assistant at the Center for Justice at Columbia University, where I still work today. The first task Dr. Downey gave me was to research and write a report about the pending Second Look Act, an assignment that overjoyed me. The research became an outlet for my survivor's guilt and the tremendous empathy I felt for the good men with excessive sentences whom I left behind in Sing Sing.

I have spent this entire speech talking about myself but I hope that you all see that my story is bigger than me. My story shows what's possible when we invest in our incarcerated population no matter how grave the crimes they once committed—an idea I believe so passionately in that I created a nonprofit organization called the Pillars of Promise, which consists of formerly incarcerated individuals who are committed to promoting positive images of incarcerated people to the public and raising awareness about what makes them deserving of second chances. I am one of many, many formerly incarcerated men and women who have successfully transitioned back into society. Today, I work at Columbia University, an Ivy League school, after being convicted of an A-1 felony. I, like so many other formerly incarcerated people, am proof that we can be put in trustworthy positions and help improve our communities and society overall. My one hope is that the success of the formerly incarcerated population becomes more apparent so that the wider public can support the idea of granting second chances.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

When listening to Mr. Muhammad, I wondered how I would have turned out if I had his childhood instead of the loving and nurturing one I had. Then, when I recalled that there was only one year in my life—ninth grade—when I had a GPA as high as Mr. Muhammad's, I began to wonder, instead, where he would have been now if he'd had my childhood. I fully expect we will all see great things from him now that he has found his way through the education DOCCS afforded him.

Thank you, Mr. Pica and Mr. Muhammad.

Now, I'd like to invite Dr. Geraldine Downey to the podium. As you heard in Mr. Muhammad's remarks, she has been an important teacher and supporter in his life. And she's here to introduce another one of her remarkable students.

Introduction by Dr. Geraldine Downey

I'm a professor of Psychology at Columbia University and co-founder of the Center for Justice with Cheryl Wilkins and Kathy Boudin whom I met while teaching in the Bedford Hills College Program. The Center invests in people impacted by incarceration by providing pathways to college, careers, and opportunities to become agents of positive change.

Many of my colleagues at the Center, including Mujahideen, who just spoke, and Jarrell, who will speak next, first met me in prison classrooms where my students often ask: What would have kept us from giving up our dreams and going down the path to prison?

Jarrell's answer, developed during his incarceration, led to Project Restore Bed-Stuy, a program with all the elements needed to reduce gun and gang violence. Jarrell enlisted Nigel Farina, the prosecutor in his case, to help shape the program. Together, they convinced Brooklyn D.A. Eric Gonzalez that such an investment would decrease community violence and incarceration.

The tougher challenge was getting young street crew members to take a chance on the program. When Jarrell explained that they would be paid to participate, he got their attention. But what got their investment was Jarrell's story of spending six years in prison and earning a degree from Columbia since his release. In their slice of Bed-Stuy, going to prison was normalized, even glorified. But Jarrell was the first person who explained what prison was really like and why he had come home committed to transforming himself and his entire community. At first, they thought he was too good to be true. But over time, they saw that Jarrell was the real deal.

Today, a third of the Project Restore graduates are in college. Shootings are down. Former rivals are working together to keep the peace. They attribute their transformation to Jarrell and to the other formerly incarcerated Project Restore team members, several of whom had earned a second chance while serving very long sentences.

It is with appreciation that I introduce my colleague and inspiration Jarrell Daniels.

Jarrell Daniels, who served six years in prison and was released in 2018, left, hugs Dr. Geraldine Downey

Remarks of Jarrell Daniels

My name is Jarrell Daniels. I am a community organizer and a PhD candidate. I stand before you today with profound gratitude and a deep sense of reflection, humbled by the journey that has brought me from incarceration to academia.

As a teenager, I grew up in a neighborhood plagued by poverty and violence, in the South Bronx. At 15, I was initiated into a gang and became entangled in a cycle of neighborhood violence. I dropped out of school and dedicated my life to the streets. My wake-up call came just three years later, at 18, when I was charged with a near-fatal shooting in a 10-man gang indictment, alongside several of my childhood friends, and sentenced to six years in prison. For many of us, our destiny seemed etched in stone: from poverty, to the precinct, to the courtroom, and ultimately to a prison cell. But I know now, that path is not immutable.

Even amid the chaos and dysfunction of Rikers Island, I managed to get my GED diploma after just two months of being held without bail. This was the first step I took toward changing. The second was listening to the advice of elders, some of them were 'lifers' who had been sentenced to die in prison. It was these men who helped to become the person I am today. They became my mentors, my father figures: the REAL Men I could look up to. And although they held on to little hope that they would be released, they still had goals and plans for their futures. They wanted to be college graduates, business owners and nonprofit executives. But most importantly, they wanted to be good husbands and fathers to their children. They wanted to be mentors to young men like me. From inside prison walls, they were creating their own second chances to be something more than a convicted felon.

Another critical step in transforming my life came just a few weeks before my release. It was there that I met Dr. Geraldine Downey, who invited me to enroll in my first college course: Inside Criminal Justice, or ICJ as we call it. This was not merely a class; it was a lifeline, a gateway to possibility, and a challenge to rethink my identity and purpose. ICJ was a unique college course that brought incarcerated men together with prosecutors and changed my perspective on the justice system. Through our candid conversations and shared experiences, my fellow classmates and I uncovered the need for legal system reform, ultimately inspiring me to work toward policy change and youth empowerment. In Dr. Downey's class, I learned to question the systems that shaped my life and saw higher education not only as an escape route but as a powerful tool to build a new identity and contribute meaningfully to society.

As I prepared for my release, I filled the pages of 16 composition notebooks with all my plans to support my reintegration back into society. The important thing was continuing my higher education journey by enrolling in community college and eventually transferring to the School of General Studies at Columbia University to earn my bachelor's degree. And I did. Along the way, I founded the Justice Ambassadors Youth Council at Columbia's Center for Justice with guidance and mentorship from Professor Downey. The Ambassador's program brings young New Yorkers—some who have already been arrested or have spent time incarcerated—together with government officials to co-develop policy solutions to address public crises like gun violence and homelessness. In our classroom, everyone brainstorms ideas about improving the lives of our city's most vulnerable youth, before they get trapped within our criminal legal system.

Now as a doctoral student at New York University, studying Psychology, my contributions to society have shifted to evaluating public safety approaches, like the Project Restore gang intervention we piloted last year in Bed-Stuy Brooklyn. My goal is to develop an evidence-based program that integrates education, mentorship, trauma healing and career pathways for at-risk youth to break cycles of poverty and violence.

No matter where you start, the opportunity to create a new story should always be within reach. I urge you to support efforts and legislation that invest in incarcerated people; acknowledge transformation and create meaningful pathways for people to reintegrate into their communities and to redefine their futures. Those efforts serve not just those who are incarcerated, but also our shared humanity and the future of our communities. Redemption is possible. I am living proof of the transformative power of higher education, community, and second chances, and I plan to spend the rest of my life paying it forward. Thank you.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Something that Mr. Daniels said has been said to me by many incarcerated people: some of the people serving very long sentences in New York prisons have transformed themselves and are working inside the prison to aid others, even though they themselves have no hope of release. Those on the inside know exactly who those people are. Mr. Daniels was aided and guided by some of those people who, in a sense, are showing the purest form of altruism. The question is whether, like Mr. Daniels, they should have a chance to prove that they can do even more good on the outside.

Thank you, Dr. Downey and Mr. Daniels.

I'd like to invite Commissioner Martuscello back to the podium, to introduce our final speaker.

Introduction by Commissioner Martuscello

I again have the distinct honor to introduce our next speaker, Ms. Tami Eldrige, an incarcerated women currently assigned to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum-security facility in Westchester County. Again, Ms. Eldrige is currently serving a sentence of incarceration within our system, but she too is so much more than her worst mistake. She is a person that has found the path to programs, earning multiple college degrees, launching innovative programs that have a positive impact on her peers, she is a mother, and continues to support her children regardless of where she lives. Ladies and gentlemen, Ms. Tami Eldrige.

Tami Eldridge, who has served 25 years in prison, remains incarcerated

Remarks of Tami Eldridge

My name is Tami Eldridge. I am 51 years old. I am currently incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. I have been incarcerated for the past 25 years.

I was born and raised in Queens, New York. My mother and father separated when I was very young. I lived with my mother, but my father's house was my refuge from my mother's physical and mental abuse. When I was 15, my father was sentenced to 10 years on drug charges. Without his protection, my mother threw me out of the house; I became homeless. From sleeping on friends' couches, to park benches and train cars, I knew I couldn't continue living this way. I looked to education: I signed up for Job Corps and got my G.E.D. and job training. I was off to a new start, but then my life unexpectedly and completely derailed. My brother was brutally murdered. He was sodomized, choked, and fatally stabbed with a screwdriver. He was 7 years old. I felt more pain and anger because of his murder than words can describe. Soon after, my mother got sick with breast cancer. I moved back to Queens to care for her. In the midst of all this, I discovered I was pregnant with my first daughter. When my mother died, I used my rent money to pay for her cremation. My daughter was 5 months old, and I was 22.

My second daughter was born two years later. I tried to support us, but I couldn't make ends meet. I didn't realize it then, but I was living in a state of crisis. We were constantly getting evicted, moving in and out of shelters, and eventually sleeping on my aunt's floor. So I left New York. I brought my daughters to Louisiana to start over. And we were on a path to a better life. But my then-boyfriend's legal troubles brought us back to New York. Coming back was supposed to be temporary, but I could feel us getting stuck again. In an

act of total panic and desperation, of wanting to get myself and my children back to our new life in Louisiana, I took someone's life. To this day, it is an act I regret with all my being. I personally know the pain of losing someone—my brother—to murder. Knowing I caused that pain in others, is indescribable. I destroyed my victim's life, my own life, and the lives of so many others. I still do not forgive myself.

I carried my fear and anger into the courtroom and into prison. I got into arguments with the judge, and serious fights with other inmates. My anger became a plague. I was arrested over 27 times in prison. I spent a collective 13 years in the box—solitary confinement.

Being incarcerated for over two decades forced me to confront my anger, and to grieve my mother and brother. It has forced me to be still and think about who I want to be in this world. Twelve years ago, I decided to stop getting in trouble and be a role model worthy of my daughters' love. I decided to get the education I had always wanted. I realized that I was my own worst enemy, and I needed to let my anger go. And I did. It was the turning point in my life.

In 2017, I earned an associate's degree in Liberal Arts from Marymount Manhattan College. In 2023, I earned a bachelor's degree from Marymount in Sociology. In 2024, I earned a master's degree from New York Theological Seminary in Professional Studies. I am currently pursuing my second master's degree, in Business and Administration, so I can help my older daughter with the small business she recently started, and share my knowledge with those in my community to encourage them to start their own businesses upon release.

In addition to going to school, I have devoted myself entirely to building a college community at Bedford Hills. I have served as a Teacher's Assistant for undergraduate classes, and as a mentor for the women pursuing their master's degrees. I recently started building a library and resource center for students of the master's program. I am also teaching a horticulture class to the new mothers in Bedford's nursery; I am teaching them how to eat healthily—how to grow, harvest, and prepare fruits and vegetables to feed their babies.

Something I am really proud of is, in 2016, I founded a step team. Step is a unique style of dance, rooted in African culture, where dancers use their bodies to create rhythms and sounds. My step team gives discipline, structure, community, and pride to the college students at Bedford. That's the important part: you need to be enrolled in college to be one of my steppers. For those who want to go to college (and be a stepper) but don't yet have their G.E.D.s, I created a tutoring group named the Judith Circle: a group of undergraduate students and alumni who give up their weekends to help women prepare for the G.E.D. I named it the Judith Circle after my friend Judith Johnson who was diligent and determined to get her G.E.D.; tragically, she committed suicide last year, ten years into a twenty-year sentence.

I wish I could do this work on the outside, out in society. I know that I might never leave Bedford. But others will. And so I help everyone I can get signed up for school. I help the other women at Bedford do the work of turning their lives around and being prepared to go home, and most importantly, I help them become the best versions of themselves.

My favorite author, Viktor Frankl, wrote that "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Although my body is not free, my soul is free. For I am choosing my own way, in this place where I was sent to die: I choose to do good things, to try to repair the harm I've caused, to love my daughters, and to lift up others.

Thank you for hearing my truth.

Remarks of Chief Judge Wilson

Ms. Eldridge loves literature. Her favorite poem is "Invictus," written in 1875 by William Ernest Henley. The poem was also a favorite of Nelson Mandela's during his 27 years of incarceration. Because it captures something special about each of today's guests, I thought I would read it to you.

Out of the night that covers me,
  Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
  For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
  I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
  My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
  Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
  Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
  How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
  I am the captain of my soul.

Thank you, Ms. Eldridge.

Closing Remarks

In a few minutes, Mr. Martinez and Ms. Eldridge will return to prison. I should also let you know that until yesterday, they had no idea that they would be here in person. For their own security, they were told that they would be presenting their remarks via video, from prison. Can you even imagine what their experience today must be like—what it would be like to be whisked from decades of imprisonment to the New York Court of Appeals to speak to all of you? What do you think they might have felt? Terror? Anxiety? Awe? Joy? Grief? Try as I might, I cannot imagine what they must have felt, whether as they were told they would be coming, when they arrived, when they listened, when they spoke, or what they will feel when they are back in their cells.

I did get a small idea of what they might be feeling relayed to me by my Chief of Staff, Kelsey Ruescher-Enkeboll, who met repeatedly with each of our speakers. Ms. Eldridge told Kelsey that the experience of trying on civilian clothes for the first time in decades, in preparation for her video appearance, was completely overwhelming, and that she has been trying to process what it means to wear a suit while incarcerated with no end in sight, and what it will feel like to have to take the suit off and turn it in this evening. She told Kelsey that she ultimately decided to embrace the clothing so that her daughters could have one happy memory of her in real clothes.

Even with that bit of insight, I don't know what this day feels like to Ms. Eldridge or Mr. Martinez. But I do know what I want them to feel: hope. Hope not just for themselves—and maybe even not mostly for themselves—but for all those who, like them, are not the same person convicted of a terrible crime many years ago. I want them to feel that speaking to this august audience gives them hope that will fortify them to continue their good works for the rest of their lives. I want that hope to spread as they tell other incarcerated people about today.

And I believe that hope is genuine, not chimerical, because those of you here in person, those watching remotely, and those who will watch later, are the people who can make their hope reality. Last year, I left you all with five happy endings. This year is a bit more melancholic: two happy beginnings and two challenges. What we are doing is not the best we can do. I know that, Commissioner Martuscello knows that, and I believe all of you know that too. We can do better. Won't we?


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