



**TESTIMONY OF VOLUNTEERS OF LEGAL SERVICE**  
New York City Council Committee on Criminal Justice  
Preliminary Budgetary Hearing  
March 24, 2026

Good afternoon Chair Brooks-Powers and Members of the City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Stephanie Taylor, and I serve as Director of the Incarcerated Mothers Law Project at Volunteers of Legal Service, or VOLS. For over 40 years, VOLS has partnered with CBOs and the private bar to provide free civil legal services to New Yorkers who otherwise cannot afford or access representation. Our five core projects serve small business owners, individuals accessing benefits, immigrant young people, incarcerated mothers, and older adults in every borough.

For more than 30 years, the VOLS' Incarcerated Mothers Law Project has helped individuals incarcerated in New York's women's prisons and jails, including the Rose M. Singer Center ("RMSC") on Rikers Island, with their family law needs. Through this work, we regularly meet parents who are trying to maintain relationships with their children while navigating incarceration, family court, and re-entry.

What we see is a crisis that goes unnoticed: the steady erosion of family relationships when parents become involved in the criminal legal system. Structural support for parents before incarceration, during detention, and after release is extremely limited to non-existent. Family court and foster care timelines continue to run while parents are being held in custody, communication with caregivers and children becomes difficult, and guidance about parental rights is scarce. As a result, many parents lose contact with their children or, worse, lose their parental rights all together without ever receiving meaningful legal information or assistance.

At RMSC, our team meets many mothers and parents who come to our legal clinics hoping to understand how to protect their parental rights. But, far too often, the question they ask us is not how to keep their rights; tragically, it's whether there is any way to get them back after they have already been terminated. Generally, the answer is no. We have found that many of these outcomes could have been prevented with earlier access to legal support.

Our legal clinics at women's prisons assist incarcerated parents with family law matters. While these clinics and the great work of institutional legal services providers and social



services organizations such as Hour Children and Osborne Association provide critical support, they are only a small intervention in a much larger systemic problem.

To address this gap, the City should take three key steps: (1) fund programs that provide family law assistance specifically for incarcerated parents; (2) invest more in community-based organizations such as Hour Children and the Osborne Association so they can develop family law advisory services; and (3) ensure that parents receive clear information about their parental rights and family court obligations at sentencing or at the *earliest* stages of custody.

To ensure that VOLS can meet the demand for the aforementioned programs, that incarcerated parents may continue to receive family law assistance and adequate legal representation, and that we may expand our offerings to all vulnerable New Yorkers in need, VOLS respectfully requests **\$100,000 in Speaker's Initiative funding**.

When parents become involved in the criminal legal system, they should not lose the chance to remain part of their children's lives. With earlier support and targeted investment, New York City can take meaningful steps to preserve these vital family connections.

Thank you.

Stephanie Taylor  
Pro Bono Director, Incarcerated Mothers Law Project Director  
Volunteers of Legal Service