

The Bronx Defenders

Redefining public defense.

**Written Comments of the Bronx Defenders
New York City Council
Committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services
May 6, 2015**

Re: Support for Int. No. 770: In relation to requiring that the department of correction establish a crisis intervention program.

Good afternoon. My name is Cheyne Castroni, and I am a Criminal Defense Social Worker with The Bronx Defenders. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The Bronx Defenders provides innovative, holistic, and client-centered criminal defense, family defense, civil legal services, and social work support to indigent people of the Bronx. Our staff of nearly 250 represents over 35,000 people each year and reaches thousands more through outreach programs and community legal education. We work in interdisciplinary teams to ensure that each client of The Bronx Defenders has seamless access to multiple advocates and services to meet his or her legal and non-legal needs. The primary goal of our holistic defense model is to address the underlying issues that drive people into the criminal justice system and mitigate the devastating impact of criminal justice involvement, such as deportation, eviction, removal of children from the home, or loss of employment, student loans, and public benefits. Instead of referring to these outcomes as “collateral consequences,” we use the term “enmeshed penalties,” which better reflects the grave risks and realities that our clients face from the moment of arrest.

In my capacity as a social worker at The Bronx Defenders, I work primarily with clients charged with criminal offenses on issues relating to substance abuse, domestic

violence, trauma and mental illness. I have worked within the field of social work for six years. My background includes a wide diversity of experience as a mental health practitioner for organizations including Jewish Family Services, Interface Children and Family Services, and Covenant House. In that time, I have employed various therapeutic interventions and modalities that range from cognitive behavioral therapy to crisis intervention.

As a certified crisis interventionist I have come to learn the value and utility of this skill-set, which I employ on a daily basis. I have used Crisis Intervention to deescalate a 16-year old client who is actively contemplating suicide after spending his first week inside Rikers Island. I have used it to help a frustrated young female client process her grief at the unexpected loss of a loved one. And I have used it to help stabilize countless clients whose incarceration has only served to aggravate the symptoms of undetected and untreated mental illness. In each of these situations and many others, my crisis intervention training has provided me with the ability to connect and effectively assist those in need. It has given me a framework to better recognize and understand the symptoms, needs, and experiences of each client I serve, be they elderly, mentally ill, developmentally disabled, veterans, etc. And it has equipped me with the techniques and communication skills that I use to safely and effectively work with clients in crisis.

At The Bronx Defenders, I have worked with dozens of clients incarcerated at Rikers Island. Their experiences clearly demonstrate that DOC staff is currently unequipped to meet the demands placed on them by people with mental illness, a group whose incarceration rate continues to rise. Correctional staff need training, supervision, and clear policies in order to respond appropriately to issues, crises, and other needs

presented by all specialized populations in custody, but especially for those with untreated mental illness.

The unfortunate truth is that Correctional staff, because of lack of adequate training, often misinterpret symptom of untreated mental illness simply as "acting out" and as a disciplinary problem. Misunderstood and perceived as dangerous, bizarre, and annoying, those with untreated mental illness experience higher rates of disciplinary infractions, incidents involving use of force and solitary confinement, which are simply ineffective ploys to manage this population and typically make matters worse.

We support all of the reporting bills before the Council today, but wish to lend our most emphatic support to Intro 770, which will create Crisis Intervention Teams and provide correctional staff with a better understanding of mental illness and ways to deescalate situations that could become quickly volatile if not handled appropriately. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, crisis intervention offers an immediate, calming approach that reduces the likelihood of physical confrontations and allows for better patient care. Intro 770- is a small but important step towards improving our mental health system, and most of all, an opportunity to work towards the creation of a much safer, and ultimately more secure, environment for incarcerated persons and correctional staff.

Thank you for your time and consideration.