

LONGER WAIT FOR HELP

City inmates face 35-day delay vs. rest of N.Y. for psych hosp bed

BY GRAHAM RAYMAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

People declared in need of psychiatric treatment before they can stand trial in New York City wait 60% longer for an inpatient bed than those in the rest of the state, figures obtained by the Daily News show.

City detainees with so-called 730 designations wait an average of 76 days for a bed in facilities like Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center on Randalls Island, the state Office of Mental Health figures show.

Meanwhile, the wait time for a psychiatric bed is 41 days in the rest of the state.

The lag means city defendants stay 35 days longer on average at Rikers Island, usually in special mental health units.

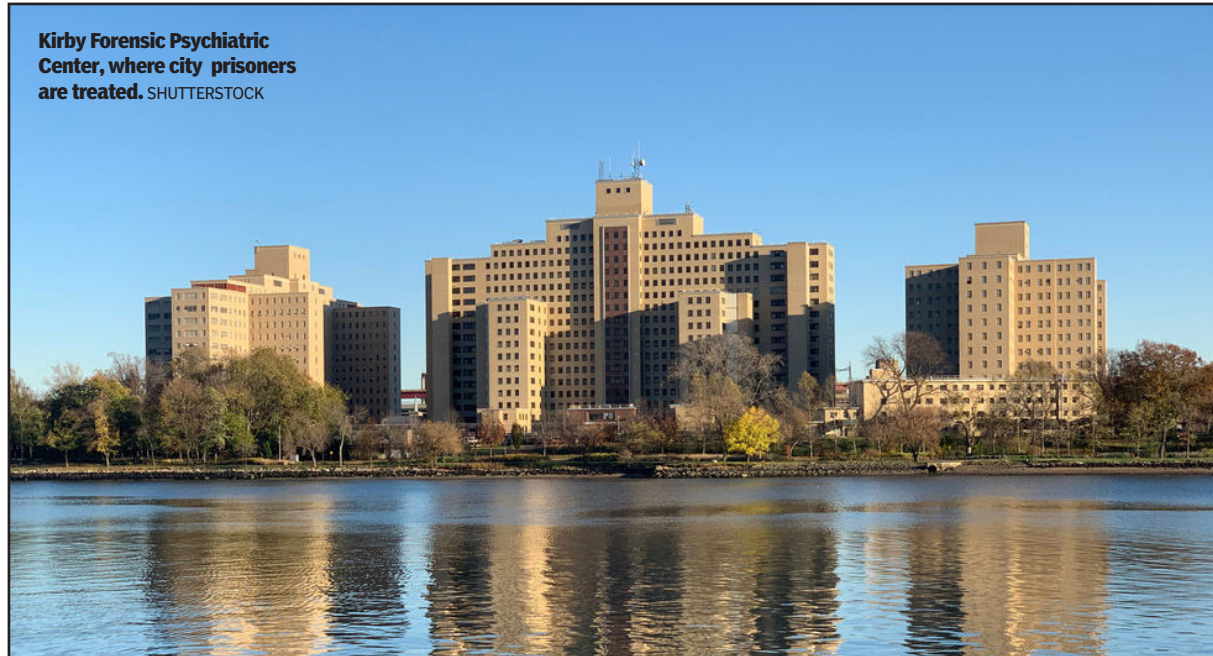
In all, 390 people were admitted in the city to an Office of Mental Health facility to be restored to competency in 2024, compared with 274 people in the rest of the state, the figures show.

Justin Mason, a spokesman for the state Office of Mental Health, attributed the backlog to “a significant increase in court orders,” especially in the city, which has experienced a higher volume of such cases. “To address this need for restoration services, we have increased inpatient admissions for competency restoration, added more than 50 new inpatient beds for this purpose in recent years, and are on track to open another 50 beds this winter,” Mason said.

Public scrutiny of conditions at Rikers’ mental health units has increased since The News published the account of a jail social worker who said severely mentally ill men are often locked in their cells for weeks and even months and don’t get their psychiatric medication.

The social worker, [Justyna Rzewinski](#), who worked in two mental health units at Rikers’ George R. Verno Center from December 2023 through this September, said the lock-ins are controlled by correction officers and are undocumented.

She said the lock-ins cause the men to decompensate — meaning to suffer worsening mental health due to stress — and act out with symptoms including constant



Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center, where city prisoners are treated. SHUTTERSTOCK

screaming, banging and smearing of feces.

“A lot of patients are on the list for a really long time,” she told The News. “It’s usually the low-functioning patients who get it the worst because they often have no outside support.”

Four City Council members on Monday called for a probe of the practice, known in jail lingo as “deadlocking.” Members of the Board of Correction also called for a probe during its Oct. 8 public meeting, at which Rzewinski testified.

An analysis based on 7,795 cases between October 2022 and October 2024 by New York County Defender Services indicates that the courts may indeed be a key piece of the system that has contributed to the backlog.

Of that amount, 15%, or 1,169 of the defendants, were flagged at arraignment as having an obvious mental health issue. Judges were more likely to send people with mental illness to Rikers to await trial in jail than those who did not have prior mental health issues.

As just one example, judges were more

than twice as likely to send nonviolent felony defendants with mental health issues to await trial at Rikers Island than those without mental health issues, per the Defender Services analysis.

“Some of this is happening because information is not trickling down to the judges that are making the decisions of whether to send our clients to Rikers or not,” said Lupe Todd-Medina, a spokeswoman for the city Correction Department.

“Instead of using the other tools they have at their disposal, like Alternatives to Incarceration, like Mental Health Court, they are just default sending them to Rikers where they are not going to get the help they need.”

Al Baker, spokesman for the state courts, said in a statement that more mental health resources are needed, including beds in psychiatric facilities.

“Defendants in need of psychiatric care to restore their competency to stand trial should not languish in pretrial detention,” he said. “They should be placed in an

appropriate facility as soon as possible.”

“Courts issue commitment orders only after mental health experts have provided their diagnostic opinions to the court and both the defense and prosecution are heard.”

The percentage of people with serious mental health diagnoses in the jail population has steadily increased since 2020, when it was just under 15%, the latest Mayor’s Management Report found. As of June 30, the end of fiscal 2024, the total was 20.3%.

The overall number of people in the system with a mental health diagnosis of any kind has also been steadily increasing.

In August 2017, there were about 3,800 people in the jails with some kind of mental health diagnosis, figures compiled by the Vera Institute show. The total dropped steadily until it bottomed out in August 2022 at just more than 2,100.

Since then, the Vera figures show, the total has steadily increased to 3,746 as of Tuesday out of the total city’s current jail population of 6,622.

Sex offender suspect gropes city pol during surprise Rikers Island tour

BY GRAHAM RAYMAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

An accused sex offender grabbed the rear end of City Councilwoman Sandy Nurse on Tuesday morning during a surprise visit by elected officials to the jails, sources told the Daily News.

Nurse whose district is in Brooklyn, Councilwoman Tiffany Caban of Queens and others were on the unannounced visit to the jails at Rikers Island in part to assess treatment of people held in

special mental health units.

As Nurse walked through an area at the George R. Verno Center, detainee Gregorio Garcia grabbed her. Correction officers intervened and pulled Garcia away from Nurse, the sources said.

Garcia entered the jails on Oct. 2 after being arrested in Manhattan on a sex abuse charge.

Nurse, who has been a critic of conditions in the jails as chairwoman of the Council’s Criminal

Justice Committee, was incensed that details of the incident emerged “within hours,” posting on social media that she was “disgusted — but not surprised.”

“The fact that [Department of Correction] staff chose to leak this information underscores how the agency’s culture weaponizes sexual assault against women,” she wrote, adding it was “a clear attempt to distract from the much needed reforms at Rikers,” especially as the

Correction Department “prepares to face accountability for its decades-long failure to address and prevent sexual assault.”

In an earlier statement, Correction Department spokeswoman Annais Morales said, “The safety of all DOC employees, people in custody and visitors is a top priority for the department.

“This disturbing incident is under investigation. We are grateful to the members of service who quickly and professionally

addressed the situation.”

On Monday, Nurse, Caban, Brooklyn Councilwoman Mercedes Narcisce and Deputy Council Speaker Diana Ayala (Bronx, Manhattan) called for a probe of extended lock-ins in mental health units at Rikers.

The tour Tuesday was triggered by an article in The News in which a former jail social worker alleged severely mentally ill men were routinely locked in their cells for weeks and even months.