

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON GENERAL WELFARE
JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE ON
PARKS AND RECREATION AND THE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

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October 16, 2025
Start: 10:20 a.m.
Recess: 1:16 p.m.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

B E F O R E: Diana I. Ayala,
Chairperson for the Committee on
General Welfare

Shekar Krishnan,
Chairperson for the Committee on
Parks and Recreation

Lynn Schulman,
Chairperson for the Committee on
Health

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Alexa Avilés
Chris Banks
Erik Bottcher
Tiffany Cabán
David Carr
Carmen De La Rosa
Robert F. Holden
Linda Lee

COUNCIL MEMBERS: (CONT.)

Farah N. Louis
Julie Menin
Chi A. Ossé
Lincoln Restler
Kevin C. Riley
Althea V. Stevens
Sandra Ung

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Matt Drury
New York City Parks

Sarah Neilson
New York City Parks

Charles Handras
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Vincent Ruggiero III
New York City OCME

Matthew Brune
New York City HRA/DSS

Thomas Berner
Hart Island Project

Melinda Hunt
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Elaine Joseph
Self

Elsie Soto
Self

Michael Hager
Self

Shirlene Cooper
Self

Jake Boswell
Associate Professor at Landscape Architecture

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Alan Joseph
Hart Island Project

Tabitha Ward
Self

Steven Lopez

Delamar Leon (SP?)
Self

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SERGEANT AT ARMS: Testing, testing, this is
microphone check for New York City Council Committee
on Health jointly with the Committee on General
Welfare and the Committee on Parks and Rec., recorded
by Sergeant Ben Leavy(SP?) in the Chambers. Today's
date is October 16, 2025.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and welcome to
the New York City Council hearing of the Committee on
General Welfare, Parks and Recreation, jointly with
Health. At this time, can everybody please silence
your cellphones? If you wish to testify, please go
the back of the room to fill out a testimony slip.
At this time and going forward, no one is to approach
the dais. I repeat, no one is to approach the dais.
Chairs, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: [GAVEL] Thank you and good
morning everyone and welcome to today's joint
hearing. My name is Diana Ayala and I am the Deputy
Speaker of the New York City Council and the Chair of
the General Welfare Committee. I want to thank my
fellow Chairs, Council Members Shekar Krishnan who is
on his way, and Council Member Lynn Schulman for
joining me in holding this hearing today.

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We are here to discuss Hart Island. New York City's Public Cemetery. The island has served as the final resting place for many low income New Yorkers and those who were unclaimed by family members. We have heard and anecdotally about issues surrounding the capacity for the island to continue to serve as a burial site in both the short term and the long term future.

A 2022 study estimated that Hart Island could run out of space as early as 2030. Additionally, reports from the News Outlet, the city indicated that HRA significantly increased the number of caskets in each trench for 150 to 200. While it is unclear why HRA made this change, what we do know is that Hart Island is running out of space to best serve New Yorkers.

Today, we want to address this issue among others. In 2019, the City Council passed Local Law 214, which I sponsored. This bill required the Department of Social Services to establish an Office of Burial Services to provide support and assistance to individuals who have lost a loved one and need information about and help assisting accessing public burial and a public allow a burial allowance or any similar program.

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We are interested in learning more about the operations of the Office of Burial Services, what the process is for bringing a loved one to a grave site at Hart Island, how those who are laid to rest at Hart Island can be identified by location and other related matters. Today, we're also hearing two bills, Intro. 1408, which I've sponsored, which would require the Department of Social Services and the Department of Parks and Recreation to undertake a comprehensive study of current burial practices, including trench locations, dimensions and depth.

The report would also estimate at remaining capacity and recommend potential changes. Resolution 775, sponsored by Council Member Farah Louis which would increase a funeral cost limit of burial services for low income residents of New York from 3,400 to 6,000. At this time, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues who are here. We are joined by Council Members Menin, Holden, Avilés, Stevens, Louis, Carr. Oh, and Bottcher. Oh, and Ossé, yes. Hi.

I also would like to thank the Committee Staff who worked to prepare this hearing, Aminta Kilawan, Senior Legislative Counsel, Panina Rosenberg, senior

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Policy Analyst, Justin Campos, Policy Analyst,
Elisabeth Childers-Garcia, Finance Analyst, Fariha
Rahman, Finance Analyst and Julia Haramis, Unit Head
and finally my Chief of Staff, Elsie Encarnacion.

I will now call on my colleagues Council Member
Schulman to deliver her opening remarks, followed by
Council Member Krishnan and then Council Member Louis
who will speak on her Resolution.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Thank you Deputy Speaker.
Good morning. I am Council Member Lynn Schulman,
Chair of the New York City Council's Committee on
Health. I want to thank my colleagues, the
Administration, advocates and everyone testifying
today for joining us for this important hearing on
Hart Island.

Hart Island is unlike any other place in New York
City. For more than 150 years, it has served as the
city's public burial ground, the final resting place
for over one million people who are unclaimed,
unidentified, or whose families simply could not
afford a private burial.

For too long, it was a place hidden from public
view, managed without transparency and too often
without compassion. That history is part of our

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city's story and it is our responsibility to confront
it with honesty and humanity. Hart Island is not
just about the past; it is a mirror reflecting how we
as a city treat our most vulnerable. During the AIDS
crisis of the 1980's and 1990's, when fear and stigma
overshadowed compassion, hundreds of New Yorkers who
died from HIV AIDS were buried on Hart Island. Many
were young, isolated and rejected by the families or
institutions that should have cared for them. Their
memory reminds us of the cost of stigma and of the
importance of leading with public health and empathy.
More recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hart
Island again became a symbol. This time of the
immense human toll the virus took on our city as
morgues overflowed and families were separated by
grief and distance, temporary burials on Hart Island
became a necessity.

The images from that time are edged into our
collective memory. They compel us to ensure that
those who rest there, whether because of AID's,
COVID-19, or poverty are never forgotten and that
their resting place is maintained with dignity and
care.

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In recent years, the city has taken important steps to reform how Hart Island is managed. The transfer of jurisdiction from the Department of Correction to the Department of Parks and Recreation was a turning point but other agencies also play crucial roles. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene ensures integrity and transparency in the city's processes surrounding death and burial. DOHMH maintains the official record of every death in the New York City, issuing death certificates and authorizing burial and disinterment permits, including for those laid to rest on Hart Island.

Through this work, the Department helps families obtain the vital documentations they need for closure, remembrance and legal recognition. The Office of Chief Medical Examiner carries a vital and compassionate responsibility, ensuring that every New Yorker, even those who die alone or remain unidentified, are treated with dignity and care. Beyond investigating unexpected or unexplained deaths, OCME serves as the city's guardian of remembrance working tirelessly to identify the unknown and reunite families with their loved ones.

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When no one comes forward, OCME coordinates the respectful transfer of unclaimed remains for burial on Hart Island, maintaining detailed records so that future identification and family reconnection remain possible. Though often unseen, this work reflects our city's deepest values that every person deserves recognition and every life is worthy of respect. Coordination among all of these agencies is essential to ensure that families can locate loved ones, visit the island, and receive clear, compassionate information. This hearing is about oversight but it's also about values. Every person laid to rest on Hart Island has a story. They were New Yorkers, part of the fabric of this city. How we honor them and how we preserve Hart Island's history says a great deal about who we are today. Instead of burying our past, we should honor it.

I look forward to constructive and compassionate conversation and to working together to ensure that Hart Island's future reflects those respecting humanity that every New Yorker deserves in life and in death. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Good morning everyone. So nice to see you all here. I am right on time but

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1 thank you to the Chairs for joining us together today
2 for this very important hearing. I'm Shekar
3 Krishnan, Chair of the Council's Committee on Parks
4 and Recreation and I'd like to thank my fellow Co-
5 Chairs Deputy Speaker Ayala and Council Member
6 Schulman for agreeing to hold this joint hearing on
7 the status of Hart Island, they various plans to
8 improve it, and ultimately to ensure that it is more
9 accessible to visitation and respectfully maintained
10 as the city's public cemetery.
11

12 Hart Island has had various uses over the years,
13 including as the host of several jails, a sanitarium,
14 a cold war missile base and a rehab center for people
15 with substance issues. It's current use as the
16 city's public cemetery, with over one million people
17 having been buried there, has been subject to much
18 debate, discussion and even criticism over the years.
19 The most problematic issue has been that for decades
20 the island was under the control of the Department of
21 Corrections, which had no expertise with cemetery
22 maintenance, and the burial of human remains.

23 It's involvement justifiably involves security
24 concerns that required family members visiting the
25 graves of their loved ones to be accompanied by DOC

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1 staff and be forced to ensure numerous security
2 checks and face significant difficulties in just
3 attempting simply to schedule a visit to the island
4 to visit their loved ones. This negatively affected
5 a visitation experience and gave rise to reform
6 movement to end the treatment of Hart Island
7 effectively as a penal colony and developed the
8 infrastructure needed to treat those buried there and
9 their loved ones with dignity and respect. That has
10 been and will always be the ultimate objective of all
11 the work around Hart Island.
12

13 After numerous hearings and consultations with
14 various stakeholders, the Council passed numerous
15 bills to help jumpstart this reformation process.
16 One bill in particular, Local Law 210 of 2019,
17 transferred jurisdiction from Hart Island from the
18 Department of Corrections to the Parks Department.
19 The transfer occurred in 2021 and now an agency that
20 has more expertise at managing land and public access
21 is in control of the island.

22 It is my hope and the hope of so many who have
23 advocated to improve Hart Island and make it more
24 accessible for those visiting their relatives buried
25 there. It is my hope that Parks jurisdiction will

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result in making it easier and more welcoming for the
next of kin and the public to visit Hart Island.

As I mentioned, the objective has been and must
always be to respect the island as a somber place
where so many visit to see their loved ones who are
buried there and we have to keep it that way. This
past July, the Parks Department released their Hart
Island concept plan that in more detail spells out
what their vision is for the long term future of the
island.

The plan is focused on upgrading and
reenvisioning the island to create an improved and
more accessible place for visitors, maximizing the
life cycle as a public cemetery and enhancing the
islands ecological and resiliency features. The
projects described are estimated to cost about \$130
million. Some of these include developing a 1,300
square foot welcome center with restrooms and
seating, implementing adaptive reuse of the island to
a historic chapel as a space for contemplation,
developing a remembrance walk, which would feature
lawns, shaded seating and quiet reflection areas near
the ferry dock. The plan also calls for developing a

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new maintenance and operations area that would
include an office building and a storage facility.

Additionally, the plan also addresses much needed
improvements to the island's ecological systems.

These projects include shoreline stabilization,
construction, to upgrade existing sea walls, adding
aquatic plantings along the shoreline to establish
new wetlands and adapting the island central field
area to account for sea level rise and allow for more
land suitable for additional burials.

I hope the plan is more than aspirational and I
think it is and it does address the number of serious
environmental concerns. In order to make it a
reality, however, there are numerous issues that will
have to be fully addressed and that is why today's
hearing is so important, to hear from the public,
from the members of city government as to where the
plan stands and what improvements are necessary to
make the island accessible for all, principally those
who are visiting their loved ones there.

Other improvements include committing to fully
developing ferry access possibilities in an equitable
way to increase access for everybody and even the
plan acknowledges that ferry access constraints that

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will not change in the near term exist and that there must be a way to maximize the potential of currently inaccessible locations of the island to increase future burial capacity.

After decades of advocacy by so many New Yorkers, Hart Island finally has the chance and opportunity to become the dignified, accessible, and well maintained place it should have always been. A place where those who have loved ones buried there can visit in a meaningful way and feel like they have all the resources, services and supports they need to be able to do so.

But it will take a sustained effort and steadfast funding commitments from current and future policy makers to realize this objective. I myself, have been out to Hart Island at least twice over my time in the Council and I have been both deeply moved by what I've seen there to learn the history and to learn about those who are buried there and the efforts that the Parks Department and other city agencies have made to address it as a burial ground. And I've also met with individuals who have relatives buried there and have heard from them about their concerns and what they want to see to make sure Hart

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Island remains accessible or even more accessible to
them and many others in their position.

And I take their views and their concerns very
seriously and that's why today, all of us as Chairs
are here and have called this hearing to discuss
these issues and hear how we can make Hart Island a
better place for everyone.

I look forward to examining the ways by which
various city agencies and all interested parties can
work together to improve Hart Island, to improve its
vision, and to improve the city's public burial and
remembrance process. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Louis.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Good morning. I want to
thank Deputy Speaker Ayala and Chairs Krishnan and
Schulman for convening this important hearing as we
work to address the inequities that exist and how our
city allows families to grieve and honor their loved
ones.

I want to begin by acknowledging a family in my
district who has experienced unimaginable loss. Last
year on Labor Day, 25 year old Denzel Chan, a young
man visiting from Texas to celebrate his Guyanese
heritage at the West Indian American Day Parade was

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1 shot and killed in Crown Heights. What should have
2 been a day of joy and community turned into tragedy
3 for his family. In the days and weeks that followed,
4 my office worked closely with Denzel's mother and
5 relatives to help them navigate the aftermath of his
6 death. What became painfully clear during that
7 process was how difficult and dehumanizing it can be
8 for a low income family to lay their loved ones to
9 rest with dignity. The Chan family faced numerous
10 bureaucratic obstacles when trying to access burial
11 assistance through the city's Human Resources
12 Administration. The current cap on funeral
13 assistance is \$1,700 and the total funeral cost can't
14 exceed \$3,400. An amount that has kept pace with
15 reality - that has not kept pace with reality.
16

17 The National Funeral Directors Association
18 reports that the median cost of a funeral and burial
19 in United States, now exceeds \$9,000. While even
20 cremations can cost over \$5,000, when including a
21 viewing and ceremony. In New York City, the price of
22 a cemetery niche to store an urn can range from
23 \$1,900 to \$6,500. For many families, particularly
24 Black, Latino, Jewish and Muslem New Yorkers, these
25 costs are simply insurmountable.

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1 Reso. 775 calls on the State of New York to
2
3 increase the funeral cost limit for low income
4 residents from \$3,400 to \$6,000. This adjustment
5 would allow more families to afford a proper burial
6 consistent with their cultural and religious
7 traditions without facing the indignity of financial
8 hardship during their time of grief. For communities
9 like mine in East Flatbush where residents often live
10 paycheck to paycheck, this increase is a matter of
11 compassion and fairness.

12 No mother should have to plead for help to bury
13 her child. No family should have to choose between
14 honoring their loved ones memory and paying rent. By
15 passing this Resolution, we send a clear message that
16 dignity and death is a right, not a privilege. I
17 urge my colleagues to support Resolution 775, so that
18 families, like the Chan's, and so many others across
19 our city, never have to endure both loss and
20 bureaucracy in the most painful moments. Thank you
21 Chairs.

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. We will now
23 recognize our Administrative panel. Matt Drury,
24 Sarah Neilson, Charles Handras, Vincent Ruggiero, and
25 Matthew Brune. And with that, I will now call on

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Counsel Aminta Kilawan to swear in members of the
Administration here to testify.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Will you all please raise
your right hand? Do you affirm to tell the truth,
the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your
testimony before this Committee and to respond
honestly to Council Member questions? Matt Drury?

MATT DRURY: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Sarah Neilson?

SARAH NEILSON: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Charles Handras?

CHARLES HANDRAS: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Vincent Ruggiero III?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: And Matthew Brune?

MATTHEW BRUNE: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you all. You may
begin.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Is anybody testifying today?
Who is going first? Go ahead.

Thank you. Good morning, my name is Matthew
Brune and I serve as the chief Operating Officer at
the Department of Social Services, which includes the
Human Resources Administration. I would like to

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thank Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chair Schulman, Chair Krishnan, and the members of the Committees on General Welfare, Health, and Parks and Recreation for holding today's hearing on the Hart Island Capital Projects Proposal. We appreciate the Council's continued focus on ensuring that Hart Island serves as a respectful, dignified, and uplifting final resting place for more than one million New Yorkers.

At HRA/DSS, as with our sister agencies, we appreciate the tremendous responsibility that Hart Island represents. As both the Council and past mayoral administrations have recognized, Hart Island is unique. For more than 155 years, Hart Island has served as a resting place for New Yorkers, including veterans of every war since the Civil War, as well as individuals affected by every major public health crisis from the 1918 influenza pandemic, to the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980's and to more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. As stewards of Hart Island, we remain committed to honoring and respecting both the decedents and their loved ones.

HRA/DSS has a specialized role to play in this process. We understand the sensitivity that must accompany service to loved ones in a time of

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mourning, and the circumstances applicants face as they determine if burial at Hart Island suits their needs.

Management of Hart Island transitioned from the New York City Department of Corrections to New York City Parks and the Department of Social Services on July 1, 2021. As part of that transition, HRA/DSS assumed caretaker responsibilities for the island, managing basic maintenance and overseeing the interment and disinterment contract. We worked in partnership with our colleagues at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and New York City Parks to ensure our administrative systems, whether around burial and interment or around visitation and locating information about loved ones remain current and continue to serve the public's needs.

Turning now to introduction 1408 sponsored by Deputy Speaker Ayala. The bill as written would require HRA/DSS, in collaboration with New York City Parks and any other relevant agency, to conduct a study to analyze Hart Island's capacity for future public burials under existing burial procedures, assess whether the procedures at Hart Island should be changed and develop recommendations if any changes

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are determined appropriate. A report would then be submitted to the Mayor, Speaker of the Council, and posted online with study findings and recommendations within 180 days of the local law's effective date.

While HRA/DSS welcomes the opportunity to conduct this study with Parks, we are concerned that 180 days would not provide enough time to complete a thorough analysis and adequate time for contracting an expert consultant and publishing a report.

So, we are urging again, a timeline of 18 months. I appreciate the opportunity to have offered this testimony on this important topic and I would now turn it over to my colleague from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiners officers for is testimony.

VINCENT RUGGIERO: Thank you Matt. Good morning, Deputy Speaker Ayala, Chairs Krishnan and Schulman and Committee members. I am Vincent Ruggiero. I am the Executive Director of Mortuary and Response Operations for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner.

As you well know, the City Charter tasks OCME with providing city Mortuary Services to the entirety of New York City. One aspect of these city Mortuary Services provided by OCME to the families and loved ones of decedents in our custody is to aid them in

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facilitating final disposition of their loved ones
for public burial at Hart Island if this option is
selected.

To this end, OCME outreach team regularly works
to provide information and guidance to those seeking
Hart Island as their loved ones final resting place
and works with our partners at DSS to ensure that
their final wishes are honored. Eligible next of kin
that request public burial at any time for either
temporary or final disposition. There is no minimum
requirement for this request and families may elect
to disinter their loved ones from Hart Island for
private disposition at any time.

Our outreach team also facilitates final
disposition at Hart Island for decedents who have
been brought into OCME's care and remain unclaimed.
For cases where next of kin is unknown, OCME utilizes
a due diligence process, the Outreach Due Diligence,
to locate and notify loved ones of the death to
facilitate and determine final disposition. This
process involves collaborations with several of our
external agencies, including the City's Public
Administrators, NYPD Missing Person Units and foreign
consular offices. Cases where next of kin remain

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unknown are also posted to the National Missing and
Unidentified Persons System, known as NamUs, which is
searchable by the general public.

Once all due diligence requirements have been
met, any decedents which next of kin remain unknown,
and with no other eligible claimant, will be referred
for public burial at Hart Island.

Once a case has been referred for public burial,
OCME staff prepare decedents in caskets with care and
place them on a specially equipped vehicle for
transportation to Hart Island. Upon arrival at the
Hart Island departure point, OCME staff connect with
HRA staff and board the DOT ferry for a short ride to
Hart Island. Our team proceeds to the gravesite and
assists HRA designated staff with removing decedents
from our vehicle for immediate burial. A manifest
containing information on all decedents is signed by
both HRA and OCME, and burial is completed by the HRA
staff. OCME at times will request assistance from
HRA to disinter decedents from Hart Island for
further investigative or identification measures.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide
testimony that offers a window into an important but
often invisible topic of burial at Hart Island. I

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would like to now offer the floor to my colleague at
Parks for her testimony.

SARAH NEILSON: Good morning, Deputy Speaker
Ayala, Chair Krishnan, Chair Schulman, members of the
Parks General Welfare and Health Committees and other
Council Members. My name is Sarah Neilson and I
serve as Chief of Policy and Long Range Planning
within Environment and Planning division at New York
City Parks. Joining me today are Matt Drury, Chief
of Citywide Legislative affairs and Charles Handras,
the Park Supervisor for Hart Island. We are also
very pleased to have been joined by our colleagues at
HRA/DSS AND OCME.

We have slides, so you've also been given the
packet of the power point, so if this - if we go to
the next slide. I'm not sure who's clicking the
slides though. Okay and I've been directed to
describe the slide. So, this is a map showing New
York City showing the location of Hart Island and a
few recent pictures of the Island.

So, thank you for having us today to talk about
Hart Island. This holds a significant place in the
city's history and has tremendous meaning for

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countless people in New York City, across the
country, and around the world.

As you've just heard from our sister agency
colleagues, Hart Island serves as the city's public
cemetery and is the final resting place of over one
million individuals. It is one of the largest public
cemeteries in the country and has served New York
City since 1869. Next slide.

This shows some historic and current images of
the island. While Hart Island is currently only used
for city burials, the island has had many uses since
the 19th Century, including a quarantine station, a
psychiatric hospital, a tuberculosis ward, a reform
school, a homeless shelter, a rehabilitation
facility, a military base, and a jail.

Pursuant to Local Law 210 of 2019, as Chair
Krishnan mentioned, management of Hart Island was
transferred from the New York City Department of
Correction to the New York City Parks, and the New
York City Human Resources Administration and
Department of Social Services in 2021. The city is
committed to ensuring public access to the island and
providing several services to help individuals locate
and visit loved ones buried on the island. In an

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effort to make the island safe for guests and improve the visitor experience, major upgrades have already been made since the transfer of jurisdiction, including the demolition of many aging buildings, and planting of new trees in woodland areas, and a few seeding in other amenities near the ferry dock.

HRA/DSS, which manages burials and landscaping on the island, has created more navigable conditions by clearing overgrowth that blocked grave plots for decades, and constructing the seating area. Next slide. This is a photo of a burial area with grave markers.

Since transfer to Parks, gravesite visitation process for families and loved ones of those buried on - for families and loved ones of those buried on the island, such as increasing capacity for each visit and shifting the visitation times to make it more convenient for families and loved ones of those buried, many of whom travel long distances to make the visit.

We typically offer two visitation days per month. One on a Saturday and one on a Sunday with 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. visits each of those days. So, that's four per month.

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These visits are generally intended for individuals with close ties to someone buried on the island and that includes family members, chosen family members, close friends and partners. Since New York City Parks began hosting the gravesite visitations in October 2021, over 2,200 individuals have been able to visit their loved ones on the island.

Can I have the next slide? This shows pictures of Urban Park Rangers leading public tours. New York City Parks is proud of its dedicated ongoing effort to increase access to the island for the general public as well. While honoring the islands unique and solemn role as the final resting place for the deceased. In November 2023, we introduced free urban park ranger interpretive tours for the general public. These have been very well received. These tours mark the first time in the island's history that public tours have been offered.

Since launching the program, the Urban Park Rangers have hosted over 1,100 participants on their twice monthly public tours and nearly 220 students on individual school tours. The public tours are designed to inform visitors about the history of the

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island, reduced historical stigmas surrounding its
past, to respectfully acknowledge those who are
buried there and to educate the public about the
island's role as critical, city infrastructure. Our
initial Hart Island tours focused on the fascinating
history of the northern part of the island, examining
how this island, not only became the city's public
burial ground but also housed institutions such as
reformatory schools, rehab programs, and even a Nike
missile base. We then diversified our programming in
2024, to offer tours of both the northern and
southern portions of the island, providing visitors
with opportunities to see more of the island and
learn more about those who are laid to rest there, to
highlight communities connected to Hart, and share
their voices.

The Rangers are now continuing to explore the
history through the development of thematic
programming including Pride Month, Prisoner Justice
Day, and an upcoming Veterans Day program. Our Urban
Park Rangers have hosted school groups at Hart Island
through the Natural Classroom program, which gives
students a first-hand experience to study sites of
historic significance under Park's jurisdiction.

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Can I have the next slide? This is an image of our concept plan. In addition to these efforts to expand public access to the island, New York City Parks, in coordination with other sister agency stakeholders, has recently completed the Hart Island Concept Plan. This is an improvement study for the island, presenting a longer term vision for physical improvements. The Concept Plan seeks to preserve and enhance Hart Island as the contemplative, quiet, and spiritual place that the public discovers when they visit the island and to improve the physical conditions and critical infrastructure on Hart to better serve those who visit and who manage the daily operations.

Moreover, the plan seeks to honor the history and people who are laid to rest, as well as those who lived or worked on the island. Can I have the next slide?

This is a screenshot from one of our public outreach meetings showing feedback from our participants. Our work to develop the Concept Plan began following the transfer of the property to parks. As part of the process, we received detailed and comprehensive public input from community members

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through two well attended virtual forums and a
digital survey.

Participants expressed a strong desire for New
York City Parks to prioritize the experience of
family members visiting loved ones, including
providing restrooms, shade and seating. In addition,
we heard a clear preference to preserve the passive
and contemplative character of the island and that
visits there should remain a peaceful experience for
the family members.

Next slide. This is a rendering of our proposed
Welcome Center. The goal of the Concept Plan is to
improve conditions on the island, while making it
easier and more comfortable for the public to visit
and pay their respects. As of now, the visitor
experience to the island remains fairly austere,
there are no restrooms, there is very limited
seating, as well as limited protection from extreme
heat, rain or other conditions.

Can I have the next slide? This is a graphic
with our key elements to the planning framework. The
Concept plan outlines a vision of potential capital
projects in response to operational needs and public
input while taking into consideration the ongoing

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logistical necessities of burial operations being
proudly overseen by our agency partners.

Enhancements to the island are also needed to
ensure its ecological communities and shorelines can
be made resilient to erosion from coastal storms due
to sea level rise and global warming.

The Concept Plan is meant to help the city make
strategic investments and identify necessary funding
to improve the island.

Can I have the next slide? So, these are
renderings of the proposed projects in the capital
plan. The Concept Plan focuses on capital projects
that are within the purview of New York City parks to
develop and implement. Such as, a modest welcome
center building, a concept for adaptive reuse of the
island's historic chapel, as a sacred space for
remembrance, sitewide circulation enhancements to
make the island more accessible, and restoration and
stabilization approaches for the natural areas and
historic resources, as well as and not least, the
upgraded maintenance and operations compound.

Can I have the next slide? This is a map of Hart
Island, showing kind of the location and layout of
the proposed capital projects. The plan also

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includes landscape management recommendations that would extend the burial capacity of the island. We believe these proposed projects will help augment the additional active capital work that is already underway including the current project that DOT is working on to upgrade the ferry landing and the almost complete DDC project to stabilize the historic chapel. Can I have the next slide, which is also the last slide? This is a photo of the shoreline at Hart and it has our vision statement.

In closing, our vision for Hart Island's future seeks to balance moderately and incrementally increased public access while honoring its significance for families and loved ones of those interred there. Our vision statement was formed in response to these priorities: A contemplative, quiet, and spiritual place. Visitors come to be close to family members and loved ones to engage with New York City's history and to admire the natural beauty of the island. As New York City's public cemetery, Hart Island provides the essential service of burials for those most in need.

Thank you for allowing us to testify before you today and for your continued advocacy and support for

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our city parks. We and our colleagues at HRA/DSS,
and OCME will now be happy to answer your questions.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. I want to
recognize that we've also been joined by Council
Member Linda Lee.

Can you tell us if the uh, this is for DSS. Is
the transfer of Administration of burial operations
on Hart Island from the DOC to HRA fully complete?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Thank you Deputy Speaker. Was
the question is the transfer complete?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes, it's fully complete.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, how do HRA and Parks
coordinate the administration of Hart Island? Like,
which agency is responsible for which aspects and
what does leadership look like?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, thank you. Broadly
speaking, the island itself is part of Park's
portfolio and my colleague just outlined obviously
the Concept Plan. At HRA we are principally
responsible in conjunction with OCM for uhm conveying
decedents to Hart Island for interments, which
happens once or twice a week based on volume. Also,
disinterment's, for which there's a well-articulated

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process when family members discover typically at a later point, uhm, the family member with whom they may have lost touch is on the island. There's a process to disinter the remains and transfer them to the family. And also, another major responsibility is landscaping and maintenance of the island to ensure that it remains a respectful, tranquil, dignified place and again, parks as I said, it's within their portfolio, so we work with them collaboratively on routine maintenance projects, looking at potential shore stabilization projects and other projects to ensure the integrity of the island so that it can continue to receive decedents today and into the future.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, who handles the burials and the disinterment's? Is that Parks?

MATTHEW BRUNE: I beg your pardon.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Burials and disinterment's, is that Park?

MATTHEW BRUNE: No, we perform that. There is a procedure in fact, we just launched an updated system called the Cemetery Management Tracking System, CMTS, which is the successor to the Department of Corrections Database, which was in existence for many

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years and served its purpose of essentially being a
lookup for people to see if a loved one is on the
island.

The CMTS, which was actually just launched a few
weeks ago was created in collaboration with OCME and
Parks and contains a whole host of functionality
which includes scheduling visitations and allowing
funeral directors to come online, basically open up a
case and schedule a disinterment process with
HRA/DSS.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, does the agency staff the
burial operations on the island? The agency does
staff the burial operations.

MATTHEW BRUNE: We - yes. I should hopefully be
responsive to your questions, Deputy Speaker.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

MATTHEW BRUNE: We have onsite HRA staff that are
there every day who are not only working with Parks
and other OCM personnel but are also overseeing our
contractor, JPL, which actually does the burial and
disinterment's in the landscaping and maintenance.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay and do you know what the
compensation rate for island burial workers is?

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MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, I can tell you for the city
staff, we're budgeted for nine staff at about
\$784,000.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, how many positions?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Nine positions.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Nine. Okay, uhm according to
Checkbook NYC, DSS contracts with J. Pizzirusso
Landscaping Corporation for municipal cemetery burial
operations at Hart Island. What was the total
contract value and can you share what work this
contract consists of?

MATTHEW BRUNE: The current contract value in
this fiscal year and outyears is pretty identical.
It's for the JPL contract, it's almost \$8.1 million
and then additionally, within our budget code, we
have the DOT Intercity Ferry, which is a little over
\$1 million. So, the total within our budget code is
about \$9.1 million. This fiscal year and also the
out fiscal years.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay and the original
contract ended in June of 2024. It was renewed.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Does DSS intend to renew this
contract again or will there be another RFP?

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MATTHEW BRUNE: Thank you. You're correct, we're currently in a renewal. We would anticipate putting out a competitive procurement as soon as next year.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: As soon as next year?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes, to rebid the services. We're currently in a renewal. There could be an extra year built in there but at this point, it's our intention at some point next year to develop and put out a competitive procurement.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do we know how many people applied for financial support from HRA for funeral expenses in the past year and how many received that financial support?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes, certainly. Uhm, in the last FY25, the last full fiscal year for which we had data, to the Office of Burial Services, there were 2,348 applications. Of which, 818 were approved, which is about 35 percent.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Why were so many denied?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, the reasons for denial are typically not compliant with documentation. It's 120 day period. Excuse me, from the time someone dies that a typically family, would have to submit documentation, which would include documentation from

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the cemetery director, a death certificate,
documented expenses relating to the burial. So,
there is 120 day frame, timeframe to submit those
documents but regrettably, unfortunately some
families in spite of that, are not able to submit all
the documentation that's needed. But I will note
too, in the 120 day timeframe, there is a 30 day
extension if needed. So, if I can just take a step
further, what happens currently with the Office of
Burial Assistance, is which is located at one of our
HRA locations in Long Island City. The application
submission is made, staff based there will review and
will outreach. Again, typically to family members to
talk about the documentation and what's needed and
what might be missing. It's generally a process that
works well but we obviously would like to see the
percentage of approvals increase. Obviously we uhm
at HRA/DSS is a large agency, we serve many people at
many parts of their lives and obviously the Office of
Burial Assistance represents a difficult moment in
people's lives.

So, we would like to see the percentage go up and
we have a system that's called a Burial Assistance
Information Tracking System, BAITs, which has served

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its purpose but it's a legacy system and it's not public facing. In February of 2026, we're going to launch BAITs 2 we're calling it, which will allow applicants actually to create an online account, to submit an application online, to upload documents and additionally funeral homes to upload documents as well. And also, it will provide an ability above and beyond our staff being available to answer questions. It will provide ability to track the process of the claim and send and receive messages and send alerts when activities have been completed. So, it's our speculation that when that is launched next year, we should see an increase in percentage of approved applications.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I think it would make the process a lot smoother but if a person is not submitting documentation via mail, I don't know what would encourage them. I don't know - I'm hoping. I hope that it does work because it's an alarming you know rate of folks that are not receiving the resources that they probably you know really needed in order to apply, and so, would love to see that number be a little bit higher than that.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And you know for DSS to do some sort of analysis to determine like what are the impediments? Like, is it just you know documentation? What type of documentation? Is it like pertinent information that's - I mean, I don't - I don't - I remember going through the you know through that process with a lot of families during the COVID pandemic.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Uhm, and it felt smooth enough for us, so I - you know our experiences were good but we also have access to fax machines and you know emails and many families don't. And so, I think that a clear, a clearer analysis to determine like what are the reasons for why families are not producing documentation. And also, is there a contact between staff and the applicants?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes, and taking all your points into consideration Deputy Speaker, uhm, I agree, we would like to see the percentage be higher. I think some of the processes not just the system itself or legacy. I think this will move us into a better

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environment and I think as we have seen with our
systems where we've moved them online, there's a
great appetite by applicants and clients. I think
Access HRA is a great example of that. Where uhm,
our clients can essentially meet all the needs of
their case; food stamps, cash assistance, rental
assistance, other benefits online.

So, we're hoping and assuming that we'll see a
similar uptake and I think also to the burial
assistance services has a good online footprint and I
think also has a really good FAQ, not just for
families but also for funeral directors and CBO's and
others who might assist families at this difficult
time.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Do you know how many of the
2,348 were COVID related?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Expired. Uhm, I don't. The two
leading ones are failure to submit documentation
within the 120 days. The second leading one is uhm,
cost exceeding 3,400 but we can certainly come back
to you with a breakout of all the categories and
reasons for denial.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, who says that that
policy like at the 3,400 limit. Like whom concluded
that that was the number?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, it is because we have the
ability to claim a share against the state. It is
set forth and promulgated in conjunction with the
state, specifically the Office of Temporary and
Disability Assistance. And so, there are some
claiming considerations that go into that and that
dictates the levels.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, that's ridiculous.
There's no way. I mean, I don't know if they're
keeping tabs on what it cost to you know services for
a loved one these days but it's pretty expensive and
so, people are scrambling, getting you know money
from whatever you know spaces and places they can get
it to be able to you know send their loved ones off
in a dignified manner and to like put a cap on that,
it's just. If they qualify for it, they qualify for
it like I don't understand why there would be a cap.
You know, it doesn't make any sense to me and it just
really infuriates me when I see that. Every time I
remember about it, I get upset all over again. Do we
know how many individuals were buried on Hart Island

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following a death due to COVID-19 pandemic and how
many of these have sense been disinterred and buried
elsewhere?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uh, yes. So, obviously uhm 2020
was the height of the pandemic and was alluded to
earlier. I think we all saw the images, the overhead
images of Hart Island. It was an enormously
distressing and sobering time for the city. Uhm,
what we saw in 2020, uhm and we'll compare it to
2019. In 2020, the height of the pandemic, there
were 2,743 burials. The vast majority of which were
adults.

In the prior year 2019, there were 1,138. So,
what you saw of course in 2020 is the burial rate
increased by two and a half times. And I'm very
proud to say that the city met the need and ensured
that in spite of a pandemic, everyone received a
respectful burial. We then saw the following year
2021, that burials sort of reverted to prior levels.
So, really 2020 was the spike here for pandemic
deaths.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But how many of the bodies
that were buried at Hart Island that were COVID

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related deaths. Do we know how many of those
individuals were disinterred and buried elsewhere?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm I can tell you that uhm we
routinely do disinterment requests. Uhm and I can't
tell you specifically how many were disinterred as a
result of COVID-19 deaths but just looking at 2020,
for instance, 27 disinterment's occurred. 2021,
there were 8 and then the following years to the
present, it generally ranges from 70 to 90 a year.

But you know I should note that our agency, we
are not uhm principally focused on the cause of
death. I mean, I think we all know intuitively that
the spike on Hart Island 2020 was due to the pandemic
but obviously our remit is to ensure that people are
buried respectfully.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, you say - you're saying
that you roughly get around 70 to 90 requests for
disinterment a year?

MATTHEW BRUNE: That's right.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That's the number? Uhm, are
those; maybe this is for somebody else but are those
numbers reflective of individuals that recently
passed where family maybe was in contacted or are
these older cases?

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MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, it's an interesting question and one I have not looked at in terms of how far back someone's being disinterred as opposed to someone more recently like with a few months but we can work with our colleagues and do a sample from the last full fiscal year and we can put a face to it.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I'm just, I'm really curious about this process but uhm I'm trying to determine whether because I know I've worked with the Office of Medical Examiner. You know on several occasions where we've had you know individuals that have passed away and didn't have any family and they've been really good about holding the body while we try to identify someone but I wonder how you know in a case where it's somebody like me is not calling and saying hey, can you hold the body? Like, are we - is that process maybe not long enough right? Where we're holding it and then burying the individual and that's creating right more disinterment's to occur than you know we should be probably having.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Right, I think uhm and I would defer to my colleague from OCME. I think they have a really robust process to outreach to work with families to make determinations and I think, I'm not

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sure if you promulgated timeframes before a decedent
might move to Hart Island but uhm...

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So, typically our outreach
process takes between 30 and 60 days. Of course
that's very case dependent right? Everybody's
circumstances differ, some cases are more complex and
a number of those go over the 60 days. I don't know
if that helps, if it helps answer your question but
like you referred to, we are very you know
understanding and we'll hold remains until -

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, but you typically hold
- you can hold up to 60 days and it is a request or
an unusual circumstance, it can be longer.

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: Absolutely, yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, are you aware of how
many - how many individuals were buried at Hart
Island that were maybe with your office for 30 days?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So, those data points, I
don't necessarily have in front of me. I can get
those back to you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I'm just trying to
figure. You know I -

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: Right, the lesser
timelines is typically when family is present

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requests burial at Hart Island. Obviously those are
a little you know less demanding on the outreach
process. It's family requested. It's easier to
accommodate. It's when you know circumstances,
decedents, you know especially more complex cases
that take longer. I think we're closer to the 60
days than the 30 days. Uhm, but uh you know we will
grant extensions when needed and you know we
understand everybody's circumstances are different.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, I'm going ask just a
few questions and then I'll come back for a second
round. I want my colleagues to be able to ask
questions as well. Does HRA have a contingency plan
for another municipal cemetery should Hart Island run
out of burial room and what is it?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uh, thank you for the question.
Uhm, so working closely with our colleagues in Parks,
uhm we have been looking at that question for uhm a
few years now. Uhm, we have determined uhm based on
the presentation uh that my colleague from Parks just
did, and the timing of the plan of course is
uncertain. But taking uhm I think a prudent and
conservative, more conservative view, uhm we have
determined that presently with the changes that Parks

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1 is proposing in its capital plan, there is currently
2 about 18 years of remaining capacity, which is uhm -
3 so I would say that we are not at the moment
4 concerned about capacity but it is one of the reasons
5 we also welcome the potential local law to do the
6 capacity study as well as looking at other methods of
7 burial to potentially extend the lifecycle of the
8 Island and the burials. Lift and deepen would be an
9 example of that. I think it's something we would
10 want to give a much fuller viewing. Cremation is a
11 possibility, although there are environmental
12 concerns there.
13

14 But as we sit here today, uhm and I think I heard
15 reference at the beginning, there was an early report
16 that said there were about eight years of capacity
17 remaining. Uhm and at that point, that was likely
18 the case but in the interim of course, DDC responded
19 to virtually take down all the buildings, which
20 unlocked more capacity. And so, you overlay Park's
21 proposed capital plans.

22 A conservative view would be that there's about
23 18 years of capacity.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, it's interesting because
25 the environmental concerns right and I get that. If

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1 we were to put a crematorium at Hart Island, you know
2 or of interest right but - who - so the fact that
3 we're not using cremation as an alternative, is that
4 a policy? Is that like legally required? Like what
5 is it, a preference?
6

7 MATTHEW BRUNE: It's - you know and that's come
8 up before Deputy Speaker and it came up in one of the
9 early reports and it was looked at. I mean, just
10 practically speaking, uhm if there was a desire to do
11 install a crematorium on Hart Island. There's
12 essentially no power running at the Island currently.
13 Also, we noted some of the environmental concerns
14 that need to be looked at. But two, again I think in
15 looking at potentially doing the capacity study under
16 an enacted local law, it would give us an opportunity
17 to do I think a much more multidimensional view,
18 which would include the question of potentially using
19 crematoriums because all faiths and religions; faith
20 and religions have different views on cremating
21 bodies as a practice. And so, in the instance in
22 which uhm a loved one is out of touch with the family
23 member, depending on their faith or their religion,
24 they could learn that this person was at Hart Island
25 but under a newly enacted policy of cremation. Their

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body was cremated, which would be contrary to their
beliefs. So, that's part of the work we want to do.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But wouldn't the same apply
for an individual that you know I don't know
practices a specific religion that requires that they
be buried at a specific amount of time or I mean,
wouldn't the same apply. It seems like the same
thing to me.

MATTHEW BRUNE: It's a fair point and I think
that would merit further evaluation and a study but
in that instance at a minimum uhm if it is
problematic to someone's individual or family
beliefs, the body would be there for them to disinter
it and dispose of it in the way in which they saw
fit.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, I'm going to get a little
bit more - if anybody is watching online, this may be
a moment you know a warning, because I'm really
curious about this from a public health perspective.
So, first of all, DSS determined that they were going
to increase the number of burials per site from 150
to 200. I would love to learn you know how that
decision was - how you arrived at that decision.

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But I'm always concerned. If you have 150, 200 people buried in a mass grave and then somebody needs to be disinterred. A family member comes in; they put in a request. How do we identify where that individual is and because of the fact that these individuals are buried in wooden pine boxes? I'm assuming that not embalmed that the uh -

MATTHEW BRUNE: That's correct.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: That the bodies are decomposing at a faster rate. And so, who is handling right, these remains at that time. Is there any public health concern right with the becoming in contact with elements under those conditions? How do you handle that?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Sure, uhm, thank you Deputy Speaker. So, in terms of you're right, there was a decision enacted in 2024 to increase the capacity of each plot from 150 caskets to 200. That was actually a recommendation from one of the early reports. That effectively increases the capacity by 25 percent. In taking your point about whether it's 150 caskets or today, 200 caskets, tracking them within a plot so that if there is a disinterment request, that you're securing and removing the right casket.

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There is meticulous documentation uhm from the time the decedent is at OCME and the decedent's placed in a pine box in an OCME truck that comes to the city island dock which then drives onto a DOT Ferry, which then makes the short ride to Hart Island.

OCME staff, HRA staff and its vendor JPL staff are present. They escort that uhm - the caskets, which happens about once or twice a week to the currently utilized burial plot. And all along the way, there's documentation and signing off to document who the decedents are and then when the decedents are placed into the plot, it's essentially diagram, so you know within 200 caskets where the individual decedents are. And to take a step further, DOC's database, which is as I mentioned, has been replaced by the recently launched cemetery management tracking system, uhm, you know always offered plot information where a decedent was. And there were obviously visitations prior to Parks and HRA taking over. But with CMTS in providing, continue to provide publicly accessible burial information. The overall experience has been

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improved because we are using and have used for a few
years CPS tracking.

So, obviously if we are physically on the island,
we know where a burial plot is because it's marked
but because things can shift over time, however,
incrementally, we do GPS tracking at each plot and
you can actually see that in the recently launched
public site. You could see a map that has all the
plots and then if you basically click on one, you'll
see all the decedents in there with additional
information on each decedent. So, if you're a family
member looking them up, you'll know exactly where
they are buried on the island.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And I'm assuming that there's
documentation, photographs or whatever it is that -
whatever way you document an individual without a
name so that a family can identify that that is in
fact their relative right?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes, so -

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Like, you haven't ever given
somebody the wrong body?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Right, generally uhm, I would say
more than - it's my understanding more than half of
the burials on Hart Island that originate from OCME,

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1 these are family members who want their family
2 members to be there. There are obviously people who
3 are sadly go unclaimed. That's the minority of cases
4 but generally, there's identifying information on
5 them. And in fact one of the things that we did with
6 our upgraded cemetery management tracking system, is
7 obviously we uploaded the DOC data and the data that
8 we've compiled since we took over the island but we
9 also work with other city agencies to fill in missing
10 fields where we could to provide as much data for
11 people when they look up someone and generally the
12 records date from the late 70's to present period.

14 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: My final question. Could you
15 tell me why is it - so I've actually been to the
16 island and I will say that Parks Department has done
17 a really fantastic job uhm of you know, maintaining
18 this space and trying to incorporate features and
19 things that you know the familial experience a lot
20 better.

21 Uhm, but how often are families coming in and out
22 of - you know are coming to visit on Saturday's and
23 Sundays is my understanding right on weekends only?
24 Uhm, how many people are going to actually visit?
25 Like, how - what's the demand?

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MATTHEW BRUNE: I would defer to Parks. They oversee that process and there's a very good process available through the new CMTS.

MATT DRURY: Yeah, thanks and thank you for the question. So, I'll turn it over to Charles, our Parks Supervisor for Hart Island in a moment but I will just note that since stepping and taking over jurisdiction and management, over 3,500 individuals have visited the island as either part of a gravesite visit or the sort of historic ranger led tour programming. So, collectively over 35 individuals. So, that's mid-2021 or so.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: But that's including staff oh, that's families?

MATT DRURY: No, no, those are public yeah, public members but I'll talk - I'll hand it over to Charles to talk a little bit more about the breakdown there between gravesite and public visits.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay.

CHARLES HANDRAS: Thank you for the question Council Member uh, Chair. Uhm, so just to echo my colleagues point. We have had since the jurisdiction transfer to the Parks Department; we have currently had over 2,200 attendees on our gravesite visitation.

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So, that's you know family members, chosen family,
friends, all people who request to do visitations.
That's just gravesite.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: What is the average on the
weekend, you know?

CHARLES HANDRAS: Uh, the number does fluctuate
seasonally. We, during the summer months, or during
you know Mother's Day weekend, Father's Day weekend,
those are generally our highest attendance numbers,
usually closer to about 35 people or sometime more
per trip on each of those days.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, okay, I just wanted to
recognize that we've also been joined by Council
Member Banks, De La Rosa, Ung, Feliz who is on Zoom,
and Narcisse.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Deputy
Speaker. Before I start my questions, I'm going to
turn it over briefly to Council Member Bottcher who
has worked with me on this issue and has a couple
questions before he has to go.

COUNCIL MEMBER BOTTCHEER: Thank you so much. I
only have one question and I appreciate the courtesy
and I want to thank the Co-Chairs for this hearing
and I want to thank Council Member Krishnan in

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particular for his leadership on this issue as the
Parks Committee Chair. We've been meeting with the
family members and advocates involved with Hart
Island and uhm, very happy we're having this hearing
today. I'm here as the Co-Chair of the City
Council's LGBTQIA+ caucus and also as the
representative for Council District 3 West Village
Chelsea Hell's Kitchen which was the epicenter of
death during the worst days of the HIV/AIDS crisis
and Hart Island, occupies a very unique place in the
story of our community. It's a place that for 150
years has been a place of both heartbreak and grace,
a resting place for over a million New Yorkers. Many
of whom died during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Rejected by
their families uhm, unmarked graves and for too long,
the island was hidden way out of site out of mind and
people couldn't visit. Family couldn't visit; they
couldn't mourn. Luckily in recent years that's been
changing. I'm so proud to be part of this Council
that's been part of that under my predecessor Speaker
Corey Johnson with the management of the island
transferred to the Parks Department from Department
of Corrections, expanded ferry service. Families can
now pay their respects. I want to thank all of you

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here today for your part that you've played in that
but even though we've made progress, we have a long
way to go. And my question is, how are you involving
the family members in this process?

I want to commend that the family members who are
here today who are advocating for a better process at
Hart Island, more opportunities to visit Hart Island,
more dignity for those who are buried at Hart Island
but how are you including them in the process? How
often are you meeting with them? How are you taking
their feedback into consideration? How are you
making them part of the process so that they in my
opinion, they should have the biggest voice of
anyone, the people who are the family members of
those buried at Hart Island?

MATT DRURY: Thanks for the question Council
Member and it's an excellent point. I think
survivors and loved ones of those buried on the
island are a primary stakeholder and I think there
are a variety of different ways in which they've been
engaged and are engaged and that can happen both on
sort of a day to day basis. You know we're receiving
direct feedback during visitations. You know we've
made policy changes and process changes in response

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1 to direct feedback from you know visitors and loved
2 ones taking part in those gravesite visitations but I
3 can also note that uhm also families of loved ones
4 buried on the island were also part of the you know
5 concept plan exercise when we had our you know public
6 facing meetings and other and things of that nature.
7 So, I think there's a variety of fashions in which
8 you know that feedback is very important. You know
9 because at the end of the day, you know no one wants
10 to lose site of the primary function of this island
11 and making sure that it remains a you know a solemn
12 and meaningful place of remembrance.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER BOTTCHER: Your meeting with them
15 frequently?

16 MATT DRURY: I would characterize interaction
17 engagement as ongoing. You know it's sort of we are
18 you know we have direct staff you know as a team,
19 that's directly assigned to oversee operations at the
20 island, working closely with various divisions within
21 our agency, whether that our planning team, our Parks
22 enforcement patrol, guard that helps the company,
23 gravesite visitations, our urban park rangers that
24 lead the public facing tours. You know our forestry
25 team, our you know capital team, you name it. So, I

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1
2 think internally, uh there is a dedicated effort to
3 make sure that we're always listening. I mean
4 frankly that's something we pride ourselves on
5 throughout our Parks system right? In terms of parks
6 playgrounds, recreation centers, what have you. I
7 think this is an approach whether it's through any
8 variety of you know whether it's a formalized meeting
9 or a more informal kind of dialogue. Those can take
10 the nature of that can vary for sure but I'd say -
11 I'd say those are ongoing.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Council
13 Member Bottcher. It's good to see you all and thank
14 you so much for your testimony too. I just uh wanted
15 to follow up on a couple things that Council Member
16 Bottcher mentioned as part of my questions.

17 First, I want to thank the Parks Department team
18 for taking me out, a team of us out multiple times
19 now to see the site. Uh and I want to in particular
20 thank a ranger Charles Handras here, the supervisor
21 of the Hart Island whose done a great job taking care
22 of the island and also giving us a very informed tour
23 as well. You know I appreciate your service and
24 proud to know that a constituent is there overseeing
25 park island - uh Hart Island too. So, thank you and

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I remember on the last visit, you all gave us a lot of history about it too and you particular did so as well as the other rangers and PEP officers as well.

So, uhm, I also want to underscore the point that Council Member Bottcher made too, which in my visits to Hart Island, really it is such a as I mentioned before, somber place and you all in talking about the history and documented it have made that clear as we visited too. And I think really two memories of the visit always stand out to me. Uhm, one is both hearing about and also being aware of the number of individuals during the HIV/AIDS crisis who have been buried there. The role and the issues that have been there given the fact that there are so many as Council Member Bottcher mentioned from the LGBTQ+ community who have been buried there too and that history as well.

That's very much impacting me. As has visiting the gravesites of babies and children who have been buried there as well. And you know I think all of those things, and then of course, hearing from as Council Member Bottcher mentioned, when we've met with family members talking about their families who have been buried there too. It always stays with us

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and leaves a deep impact about the importance of making sure that the place remains and is honored as a burial ground and that the family members who are the most directly impacted by the changes, their voices are heard through the process of envisioning and redesigning it.

So, one question I have before getting to my other ones is, would you all be open and I expect you would be for I know you've had conversations during the process but I'd love for both Council Member Bottcher and I to be able to meet with you all and facilitate a meeting with some of the members, family members too who have probably communicated with some of them during the process but I think I speak for both Council Member Bottcher and I and say that we'd appreciate being able to facilitate that meeting with you all and so we can make sure their voices are heard too as part of this process.

MATT DRURY: Yeah, absolutely. You know we are always open to engaging with and making sure that folks you know feel heard and you know like I think we would characterize there's a decent degree of likelihood that there has been a degree of interaction already but to the degree that you know

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that's something we are just always stand ready to
make sure we can sit down and kind of hear from folks
that are most directly involved and impacted by the
activity on the island for sure.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Great, thank you. And now
just going over just you know some other questions
that are related too but can you discuss just
generally, since Parks took over jurisdiction of the
island in 2021, what are some of the improvements
that have been made to date?

MATT DRURY: That's a great question Council
Member and thank you. We're actually quite proud of
the work that's happened as I might have noted
earlier. You know it's been not only an interagency
effort as you can see here today but within parks, an
interdivisional effort I think there's been a really
dedicated focused effort to improve the visitor
experience and I'm going to turn it over to Charles
to highlight a few of the policy changes and
programming changes that have happened over the years
but I think most notably, the introduction of public
facing tours for folks that aren't necessarily
visiting a specific individual or a loved one. I
think making those available you know helped

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1 introduce a whole new universe of individuals to the
2 really fascinating and important history of the
3 island. And so, we're quite proud those visits have
4 been very, very well received. They're conducted
5 extremely respectfully and provide really - but I
6 would argue that's part of the most notable new
7 development but I'll turn to Charles to provide a few
8 more examples.
9

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sure.

11 CHARLES HANDRAS: Thank you for the question
12 Chair. So, we're proud to say that Parks has made
13 several improvements to the way that we conduct our
14 gravesite visitations for the family members and
15 loved ones of those who are left behind. Some of the
16 highlights that we'll include is easing of some of
17 the restrictions from the Department of Corrections
18 era. People are now allowed to bring their phones
19 and other belongings on their visits where they may
20 not have been allowed to prior under the DOC
21 Administration.

22 We don't require a photo identification when
23 people are coming to their visit. All we know is
24 that they're part of the reservation list, that
25 they've made an advance. We've also increased the

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visitation capacity for these gravesite visits.

During the DOC era, they were able to accommodate 25 visitors per trip. We've been able to increase that up to about 35 people per trip. Sometimes a little bit more and we're also proud to say that we've been able to adjust the visitation times. Based on the feedback that we've been getting over the years from the family members and loved ones who come on these visits, they requested a shift in the time to a slightly layered timeframe. So, we switched it to 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. to make it a little bit easier for people who are often traveling from out of state and even from outside of the country to visit. And through our agency partners at the Department of Transportation, we were able to adjust the visitation schedule to also now include Father's Day weekend and Mother's Day weekend as well again, at the request of the visitors.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you and can you describe just a bit more about the gravesite visitation process. So, the different - the ferries, the times and then what happens when families get to island itself. It would be great to hear in a bit more detail about the whole process.

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CHARLES HANDRAS: Sure, thank you for the question. So, generally speaking our gravesite visitations as we mentioned prior, they have been two days per month. One Saturday per month and one Sunday per month with a 10:00 a.m. and a 1:00 p.m. trip on each of those visits. Families and loved ones can request these visitations either by going on to the Hart Island website and requesting these visitations through the digital request form. They can also email our office or they can call our office, whichever is easier for them and they can set up a reservation request. That request will need to be submitted at least five business days in advance and we've been able to accommodate basically everybody that has wanted to make their visits as noted before the busy season does usually have a higher visitor ship, so occasionally we may need to offer an alternative time or alternative date, such as you know maybe a 10:00 a.m. visit if the 1:00 p.m. visit has already reached maximum capacity.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you and I also want to recognize that we've been joined by Council Member Cabán online. And then going - and Council Member Ariola as well. Just going back to the projects,

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there is a few different ones addressing a number of
different things but given the plan, which projects
are most urgent in terms of shoring up the islands
infrastructure, ensuring the safety of visitors and
workers. What would you say the priority list is?

MATT DRURY: That's a great question and you know
the concept plan was obviously we're quite proud. It
required a lot of time and staff intensive, a lot of
great work by our planning division and to provide a
little more detail. And I'll hand it over to Chief
Neilson.

SARAH NEILSON: Hi, thank you. Really appreciate
the question and the opportunity to say a little more
about the projects. We set them up in sort of an
open way so that depending on what funding comes
through first, we could sort of take whichever route.
We do think that we'll be putting forward the request
for the visitor center as our first one. Again, just
leaning into this, wanting to bring the families out,
the visitors out but a little bit more comfortable
than it is now. That we could start with that and
then add the other projects as funding is available.
Although if all the funding came at once, we would
accommodate that too.

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CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you and what's the
total amount of funding in the Parks department
budget related to Hart Island for Fiscal Year '26 and
in the outyears?

MATT DRURY: So, the agency doesn't structure its
budget by property but we can kind of characterize
the sort of you know team if you will to kind of you
know in terms of from a staffing perspective. There
is a Hart Island specific team of two that's year
around you know full time individuals that's sort of
within our Bronx Borough Parks operations team but I
think it's important to note that there are many
other divisions that provide you know very steady on
the ground support including our urban park rangers
you know because ranging from two to four of those
will accompany to the public tours. Our Parks
enforcement patrol guard that accompanies the
gravesite visitations, that can range from four to
five. So, and then that's not to mention the other
sort of divisions that often have occasion to help
support activities on the island, whether that's
forestry team, you know the capital division
overseeing like ongoing work, you know planning,
etc., etc..

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1 So, you know I don't have a dollar figure for you
2
3 because that's just not how our budget is structured
4 but except to say that it is. Uh, I would argue a
5 particularly unique property within our portfolio
6 that you know requires and merits sort of a really
7 strong intra-agency approach.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Uhm and just
9 going back to uh you know I think before we were
10 talking about the gravesite visitation process.
11 Currently, as you all mentioned with ferry service,
12 there are two opportunities a month for family
13 members to visit and what we've also heard from
14 family members too is that because it's only twice a
15 month, sometimes it can be very difficult or
16 impossible to be able to visit a relative at a
17 special day or for a certain milestone when they want
18 to go be with their loved ones and I'm just wondering
19 what steps the Parks Department and other city
20 agencies have taken to find ways to increase
21 visitation.

22 So, for example, part of this plan is improving
23 ferry service as well. So, what's been explored
24 there in terms of increasing capacity to allow for
25 more visits or are there other options as well? How

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can we make it more - make access easier and more
frequent for those visiting their families?

MATT DRURY: Yeah, thanks for the question
Council Member and it's a good point. Uhm, I think
there's been a lot of thought about how to uhm
strategically you know increase capacity and first
and foremost, I think I would you know state pretty
clearly that there is more opportunity now to visit
the island then there was in previous - in the
previous era. So, you know we're not resting on any
laurels but I do want to be very clear that you know
those opportunities have increased significantly.

Having said that, we are very much open and
interested in thoughtful you know incremental
increases, you know commensurate with you know the
demand. As Charles noted, so thus far, you know we
are enlargely able to accommodate you know folks that
are interested in gravesite visitations. So, but
having said that, there's no denying that some folks
have to travel from further away and you know the
scheduling you know by definition since it needs to
be managed access by its physical location, sort of
by definition. You know we acknowledge and
appreciate that there can sometimes be you know

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conflicts or inconveniences that come with that. So,
we are definitely interested and that's something
we're very actively exploring and I think that was
one of the themes that sort of imbued our concept
plan work as well.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I think that would be good
to discuss further and I look forward to it too,
especially with family members as well to hear about
what their concerns are and how we can address it
together as part of this process.

Uhm, similarly uhm you know I think one thing
that's come to our attention as well too and we talk
about it on the visit as well is how do we make sure
when members come to the island, I know there are
rangers, PEP officers there to escort them to make
sure they can go to the right place but of course,
they're coming in a very painful, difficult moments.
These are could be trauma associated with it too.
How do we make sure that our Parks Department staff
have the requisite training, even for their benefit
too as Parks Department representatives, that they
have the requisite training to be able to provide and
work with family members who may be grieving or have
other difficult and painful memories. Are there

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training programs offered currently? Is there a discussion about increasing those training programs or having dedicated personnel that have had experience with trauma and work in grief counseling to work with families when they come to the island?

MATT DRURY: It's an excellent question and one of the things we're most proud of is the nature and character of the visits. I think one of our core goals as we stepped into this role overseeing the island is to make sure that the visitation experience, which you now had been described by some as less than ideal in previous eras. You know we wanted to make sure that it could be conducted as thoughtfully and sensitively as possible.

To characterize that a little further, I'll hand it over to Charles to talk a little bit about the way in which the visits are staffed and handled.

CHARLES HANDRAS: Thank you again for the question. So, to expand on the gravesite visitation, so as previously mentioned, our gravesite visitations are conducted by members of our parks enforcement patrol but specifically, by our honor guard unit. Our honor guard unit is comprised of members who in addition to attending, officiating various events

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1 that Parks participates in, they are also the unit
2 that serves on funerals. Especially for members of
3 service, even within our own department. So, these
4 folks, these officers and sergeants and other staff
5 in Parks Enforcement Patrol Honor Guard Unit, they
6 are very experienced and well versed in attending to
7 the needs of people who are experiencing grief at the
8 loss of a loved one.
9

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And I think it's something
11 good to keep in mind too as we move forward with the
12 plans as well. Uhm, I - you know just a couple more
13 questions and then I'm going to turn it over to my
14 other Co-Chair is uhm you know we've also heard from
15 families that sometimes when they visited; I think we
16 discussed on the visit as well but gravesite markers
17 may have been placed in different locations during
18 their visits uhm and it's been a concern for them
19 too.

20 So, how do we ensure that both that that doesn't
21 happen or we train the Parks Department personnel so
22 they know where to place the markers and make sure
23 there's accuracy?

24 MATT DRURY: Thanks for the question and I think
25 Charles will be able to speak to the process that

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sort of proceeds, immediately proceeds a visitation day of that nature but also as you heard, our colleagues at HRA/DSS you know having upgraded the database, the sort of master database, that is a hugely important resource for this effort. So, I think collectively we have seen significant - we have seen and will see significant improvements on that front but I'll turn it to Charles to talk a little bit about sort of the marking if you will that takes place.

CHARLES HANDRAS: Thank you again. So, regarding the marking of the gravesite. So, in advance of the visits, when a family member or a loved one requests a visit that goes through our office, we search through the available official records of where the decedents are located and we send the exact - the locations, the plots, to our staff over at the Parks Enforcement Honor Guard. They make the physical trip in advance out to the island to put on the temporary markers of where within that plot that specific decedent that deceased person is laid to rest. And they'll put that out there in advance and again, this is based off of the official records that we have

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access to and are in coordination with our colleagues
at HRA.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you and finally,
what funding has been set aside for the plan going
forward? And are there opportunities for the Parks
Department to continue hearing from affected
stakeholders as you move forward with the plans to
improve that? Which I think from you now discussions
we're having today, I think that could be very
valuable as well.

MATT DRURY: Yeah, that's a great question and
thanks so much. Currently the projects that are
identified in the Concept Plan, which is again you
know just recently released are not technically -
those projects are not technically funded, though I
should note that there is very active work, very much
underway, capital projects including you know DOT
work on the ferry landing. DDC's project to
stabilize the chapel, some shoreline restoration
projects. So, there is active work and investment
that is very much underway. Separate and apart from
that, we are open to any and all, you know we're
exploring various you know funding opportunities in
close coordination - you know ongoing conversations

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1 with the Mayor's Office and OMB. Obviously they're
2 familiar. You know they're aware of the plan. Very
3 familiar of the vision. Uhm, and then turning to the
4 notion of in terms of input and feedback, we never -
5 whenever we undergo a planning exercise, whether it's
6 a concept plan or anything similar than that, that's
7 never the end of the story for us, right? Like I
8 think as an agency, we pride ourselves on listening
9 and making sure whether it's direct feedback from our
10 park visitors and users on a day to day basis to any
11 of our park staff or 311 calls or correspondence we
12 received or even just staff observations. Like out
13 there you know out there in the - uh on the ground.

14 So, yes I think we see this as an ongoing sort of
15 you know dynamic and never ending process right.
16 Like this is something we're always going to learn.
17 Just in the last few years alone, you know we've
18 learned a lot. This is a very, in the grand scheme
19 of things, this is a very new effort and so, I think
20 we are really excited that it's been well received.
21 We're proud of the work that's already happened but
22 we don't see this as you know any sort of mission
23 accomplished by any means. Like we look forward to
24 working on this further.
25

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CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Well, I appreciate Parks
willingness to continue hearing feedback as well and
I think we all share the goal of both in light of the
history of the island. In light of the vision that
we all have and our mutual recognition of the
importance of preserving it as a burial site first
and foremost. We appreciate your work and we're
grateful to all the staff at Hart Island who are
taking care of it every single day. I know it's not
easy work and we thank you all very much.

Thanks for the time Co-Chairs and now I'll turn
it over to Chair Schulman.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Thank you very much and
thank you for everyone that's here and for sitting
here for this. So, I have a couple of - I'm going to
skip around a little bit. Uhm one question I have so
because of Super Storm Sandy and other weather events
and all that, there were bones that have been on the
shoreline and collapsing into the water. So, my
question is, why the Parks Department didn't put out
an RFP for shoreline restoration and instead is
focusing on turning the island to - working on the
island for visitors? So, that's the question I have.

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1
2 MATT DRURY: I think we disagree with the premise
3 Council Member. Thank you for the question but there
4 is an active shoreline restoration project that's
5 underway and more work is contemplated in the concept
6 plan as well. I think obviously respecting the
7 island's core function as the city's public burial
8 grounds is first and foremost in everyone's minds.
9 Having said that, the island does serve an important
10 role for visitors and we want to make sure that that
11 experience is as pleasant and meaningful as possible.
12 So, I think we see this as a united holistic approach
13 to making sure that the experience on the island can
14 be thoughtfully managed.

15 There is no doubt that it is an island you know
16 located where it is and it is susceptible you know to
17 storm surge and things of that nature and that's
18 something that's very, very much being incorporated
19 into our thought and planning moving forward.

20 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Can - when, when, I mean
21 I'm not Chair of the Parks Committee but if you can
22 get us information about the shoreline restoration
23 and how that's happening and any details, that would
24 be very helpful.

25

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MATT DRURY: Absolutely both for active work and
for -

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, uhm I also want to
ask so uhm the uhm it was mentioned by DSS that the
capacity is 18 years to bury people there. You said
in your testimony, you said that uhm prior to the
plans by the Parks Department, uh I mean with the
plans I'm sorry, for the Park- by the Parks
Department, the capacity is 18 years. If the Parks
Department hadn't come up with those plans, would the
capacity have been greater?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, thank you for the question
Chair. Yes, uhm because obviously for instance if
you're creating a visitor center, that would take
some land out of use. So, uhm again working very
closely and constructively with the Parks Department,
we determine that as a most prudent figure would be -
forecast would be 18 years.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, if it -without those
plans, do you know what the forecast would have been?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, I can give you a general
sense because with the island itself is uhm, there
are different components to the island, some of which
are more susceptible to burials than others.

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So, uhm in looking at a study, there are things that are sort of called like future opportunities, which would require a lot of resources. This would raise the land and make them potentially feasible for burials.

So, in eliminating some of those and some of the work that we've done, our estimate would be more like in the absence of any work, it would be more like 27 years.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, thank you very much and so, you talked a little bit before about disinterment. How many requests do you get a year approximately?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uhm, thanks for the question. It ranges. I think this year, we're probably on track for uhm, we've had 63 through September, so it probably will be 84 based on that and then prior year it was 89. It's a pretty consistent number.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: It's a pretty consistent - I was going to ask you if there was any trend or anything. So, the other question I have is uhm you have database.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes.

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CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Yes, so the database only goes back to 1977. Is there any particular reason for that or that's just when it came online or I'm just curious?

MATTHEW BRUNE: It's part of the - yeah, it's part of the history of Hart Island. Unfortunately, there was a fire in the 70's, which destroyed a lot of records, which are unrecoverable. So, the city and its database with confidence can stay really the late 70's on. The publicly accessible records are available from that period.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: So, uhm I have a question about if folks are visiting the island right, uhm what are the plans if God forbid there's a medical emergency or something like that? Because some of the things that we've heard is that it takes a long time for any kind of help to come to the island and all that. So, can you just kind of lay that out?

MATT DRURY: Yeah, it's a great question. Thank you Council Member and obviously the safety and health of our Park goes all throughout our system, it's a top priority for the agency and I'll hand it over to Charles to talk a little bit more about some

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of the mechanisms that are in place for current
visitors.

CHARLES HANDRAS: Thank you for the question
Chair. So, our staff that operate on Hart Island,
whether it's our Urban Park Rangers, our Parks
Enforcement Patrol, Honor Guard and our Hart Island
Office Operations team. We are all CPR and first aid
certified. We are also certified AED respondents and
we also carry first aid equipment and AED's during
these visits, whether they are tours or gravesite
visitation. So, that equipment and those trained
personnel are on site for these visits.

MATT DRURY: And I'll just note, you know this is
an aspect of thought that was very much incorporated
into the Concept Plan as well and it's probably worth
mentioning that you know the proposed visitors center
for example, could include interior space that would
be really helpful in sort of a first aid experience
if someone you know with heat exhaustion what have
you right? So, there's components in which this you
know some of these interests are incorporated into
our thought and planning.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, I appreciate that.
I used to work for the emergency medical service, so

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I'm going to ask, how long will it take for if
there's an ambulance needed or something like that to
get to the island?

MATT DRURY: So, the ferry trip itself from dock
to dock is relatively short, five to ten minutes.

CHARLES HANDRAS: That's correct.

MATT DRURY: But you know obviously there's a lot
of factors and variable at play there in terms of you
know getting to city island itself, etc., etc..

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Can you describe the
current gravesite visitation process?

MATT DRURY: Sure, thanks I think uhm Charles I
think can kind of narratively describe you know how
the visitations broadly work when the visitors arrive
to the city island dock.

CHARLES HANDRAS: Absolutely. Thank you for the
question. So, the gravesite visitations, once the
families have requested the visitation, again, at
least five business days in advance, it goes through
our office. We get the locations of where they're
looking to visit. Those locations are sent to our
Honor Guard team who mark out the locations in
advance. On the day of the visit, the families will
need to arrive at the dock prior to the departure

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time. There is a sign in process where they sign in.
they also sign a waiver form before they can board
the ferry. The ferry is free, no charge and it goes
over to Hart Island usually in about a five to ten
minute boat ride and once on the island, all of the
visitors and staff board a shuttle bus that is
provided and the shuttle bus will drive along the
main roads along the island and once we've reached
the gravesite locations that have been plotted out in
advance, we'll take the family members and guide them
to the location of where their loved one is laid to
rest, especially if it's a first time visitor who
maybe is not familiar with the island. They'll take
them to that location, answer any questions that they
may have. The families we usually have anywhere from
about 30 to 45 minutes at the actual gravesite of
their loved one. At which point, the shuttle bus
will return to pick everybody up and once everybody
is collected, they'll return back for a return trip
on the ferry.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay. How many people
have been out? Since Parks took over the island, how
many people have come out for -

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MATT DRURY: A grand total of over 3,500
visitors.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, uhm, now I'm going
not ask OCME a couple questions. How does OCME
maintain and verify the linkage between the medical
examiner case numbers and specific burial plots on
Hart Island?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: Thank you for that. Sorry
about that. In conjunction with HRA, when burial is
completed, they will provide us back with the plot
numbers, which we enter into our case management
system to you know correlate each case with its
burial location.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: So, since my Committee
oversees OCME, I know that you have all new DNA
equipment and all kinds of fancy stuff, so how does
that fit into identifying individuals and things like
that?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So, as far as unidentified
individuals, the number that go to Hart Island,
relatively low. Usually low to mid-20's but again
you know, we exhaust all our capabilities in
identifying. Mostly through the outreach process,
it's not that often that the labs are needed to get

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involved with identification of individuals going to
Hart Island. It's more a uh, I'm sorry - we also
have an IRC, Identification Committee that works on
particularly difficult cases and again, Hart Island
is the temporary interment for these cases and quite
often we'll reach the HRA to bring decedents back if
a new identification modality or a piece of the
puzzle comes forward where we can facilitate
identification of those cases.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Has the new DNA technology
helped?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: It has. It has. We've
seen that in other instances where more recent
identifications have been made.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: How does OCME coordinate
data in record keeping with the Parks Department,
HRA, and DOHMH to ensure consistency and accuracy
across all the systems?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So again, I don't know if
you want to touch on the cemetery management track
system. We also have our case management system.
The agencies are - maintain very good communication.
Our systems as you know in your capacity, communicate
with the Bureau of Vital Statistics databases. We

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1
2 have constant communication with BVS regarding
3 decedents and their information. HRA uh OCME has
4 access to the HRA systems and we you know I would say
5 between the manifest, the systems and our constant
6 communication, we are - we communicate and share
7 decedent information across pretty effectively.

8 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, I'm going to give
9 you some opportunities here, so one is, do you have
10 any policy, staffing, or funding constraints that we
11 can help with that limit your ability to expand
12 identification or family outreach efforts?

13 VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So, this Administration
14 was kind enough to provide some funding for
15 additional outreach personnel. We were able to
16 actually double our current outreach personnel.
17 Those individuals I think with the exception to have
18 been identified they were going through extensive
19 training, so they're not fully up to speed yet but
20 they will assist in you know to identifying decedents
21 and identifying this needs to go to Hart Island or
22 affect private disposition or disposition at the next
23 kins request at Hart Island. So, we thank you for
24 that.

25

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CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: What legislative or administrative changes could help OCME improve transparency, family notification or the identification of those buried on Hart Island because as you know when we have these hearings, we sometimes come up with legislation, so, giving you an opportunity here.

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So, I'm going to uh - I'm not exactly sure which one you're speaking of but we have a few in process but uh -

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, we can talk offline and whatever we can be helpful with and I also want to ask you, has there been any instances where a body has been misidentified?

VINCENT RUGGIERO III: So, many years ago, we had you know an instance where we had to you know search through Hart Island and the records to try to determine but it turned out that was not the case there, so. Uhm, misidentification does not really take place. We have very robust - we always air on the side of caution where we're not going to identify it right? Identifying and ensuring 100 percent accuracy with our decedents is our primary goal. So, uhm, you know we have not had that issue. Again, we

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will use Hart Island as a temporary interment if
we've exhausted all identification process and then
you know return to see if additional identification,
modalities or something has come forward but we have
not misidentified anyone that is going to Hart
Island.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: I appreciate that. One
last question for the Parks Department, which is that
because it's an island, so I mean I assume when you
guys are doing any kind of building or any kind of
structural work that you test to make sure that a
sinkhole doesn't develop or you know something along
those lines and you know just want to know what's in
place to ensure.

MATT DRURY: Yeah, typically speaking, thank you
for the question Chair. Typically speaking, any
capital project that the agency undertakes is often
accompanied by you know site borings and things of
that nature. This island is particularly unique
because of its you know it's sort of physical
constitution right? So, that's something that's very
much top of mind as we're going to explore any
further work.

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CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay, thank you. Uhm,
Chair? Uh, that's all my questions for right now,
thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I had a couple of follow-ups.
Can you tell us who is responsible for the data
collection and reporting in relation to the
gravesites and who is responsible - who was
responsible before the island was transferred to HRA
and Parks?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Deputy Speaker, that information
was maintained by Department of Corrections.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay. So, the data on open
data has only 4,519 records. Hart Island projects
that project has 80,490 listed as the number of
people buried on Hart Island since 1980. The open
data records go back to 1981, so why are there so
many records missing? Is that because of fire?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Because of the fire and as I
noted too as part of the upgrade into CMTS, there was
proactive outreach to other agencies to try and fill
in missing data field, particularly from earlier
records, so that people going online have the best
opportunity to uhm determine if a loved one is there.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, if I went online today,
how many individuals are listed on that database?

MATTHEW BRUNE: It's a great question. I can get
you a figure but if you are searching for someone to
be responsive to your question, who may have died in
the late 60's, the 1950's, uhm that record would not
be reflected.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Wow. There were burials also
happening in the 1800's, right the late 1800's.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm assuming there are no
records of those either?

MATTHEW BRUNE: There is a general understanding
of where the bodies are buried. Since early 1869,
which would also include Civil War Veterans. Uhm,
obviously in a period of gosh 150 plus years,
different people have had responsibility for the
island, different record keeping methodologies, but
you know obviously today, I would say particularly
the work we're all doing together, we have sort of
the gold standard for tracking where people are
buried. But for prior generations, we do have a
general sense of where decedents from different eras
are buried.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I'm assuming that we're
digitizing all records now.

MATTHEW BRUNE: I'm talking all records in the
sense of you might be part of the island and know for
instance this is where people from the post-Civil War
era were buried or this is an area where people
during the influenza in 1918 are buried.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Where is that information
documented? Is that just an internal document or?

MATTHEW BRUNE: It's more internal. I believe
there's some marker on the island but yeah, it's more
internal.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, go ahead.

MATT DRURY: I'll just add, when it comes to sort
of the visitation process, you know it does happen on
occasion when someone is interested in visiting
someone you know that was buried in earlier decades,
earlier centuries and we do our best you know given
sort of the historical understanding of where burials
happened at various points and time, we're often able
to kind of lead them to a approximate location so
they can have that moment of remembrance and so, we
certainly do everything in our power even if the
exact sort of pinpointed location might not be

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available. We do our best to make sure that they can
still have a very you know meaningful and important
experience.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, are those areas in the
recently identified locations for future burials?

MATT DRURY: Correct me if I'm wrong, you mean,
will there be previously used areas that will be
considered for further burials? Is that the
question?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

MATT DRURY: I think in terms of how that rotates
around -

MATTHEW BRUNE: That gets to the question of uhm
of deepening and lifting where you are recycling
previously used plots, which are understanding that
was a practice at Hart Island decades ago. Uhm, so
to be responsive to your question the sites we're
looking at currently for future burials, are not - we
would not be using that process of lifting and
deepening but that is something we would like very
much to look into if the local law is enacted as a
way of maintaining and indeed potentially increasing
capacity on the island.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I mean, was there a possibility of doing this without us having to enact the law?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Pardon me?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Was there a space where this could have been - where this study could have been conducted without us mandating that to local law?

MATTHEW BRUNE: It's a fair question. These are conversations we are having constantly with Parks. What I do like about uhm reading language to the local law, the proposed local law is I think it really gives energy and focus and momentum to things we're already doing and I think would show it share a citywide commitment to making sure that Hart Island remains a viable resting place for generations to come.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, uhm, DSS keep record of which gravesites do not receive visitors and may be considered abandoned if you will?

MATTHEW BRUNE: I'm sorry.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, when - alright so we have x amount of gravesites. When families are coming to visit, we do we know if it's the same families that are coming to visit? The same gravesites or you know

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1 like is there a fluctuation? Are there gravesites
2 that have never like been visited at all?

3 MATT DRURY: I mean over the history of the
4 island, I mean my understand is upwards of one
5 million people are buried, so by and large, I mean I
6 think the more historic burials, I think it's fair to
7 say like don't get visitors as often. Just because
8 of the way time uh proceeds but I think with each
9 visit and Charles can correct me if I
10 mischaracterize. You know it breaks out to roughly
11 half and half in terms of first time visitors, you
12 know newly visiting you know for their first
13 experience and we also have a significant number of
14 repeat you know consistent frequent visitors if you
15 will as well. So, it's a combination.

16 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, can you explain why
17 some burial sites are marked with a headstone and
18 some are not, most are not?

19 MATT DRURY: Yeah, in terms of the actual burials
20 themselves in terms of the presence of like the
21 markers or stones?

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: The markers yeah, hmm, hmm.

23 MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes Deputy Speaker, there are
24 markers and that is not only to note where the plot
25

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is but that also serves as a reference point to do
GPS mapping.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: No, we saw a photograph I
think in Parks presentation of headstones or what
appeared to be headstones.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Uh I believe those date from a
prior era. We used sort of upright and white markers
that denote more recent plots and that's what we mark
from.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: And do we know what the
number of children that are buried at Hart Island?
Are they buried separately or are they buried -

MATTHEW BRUNE: They do have a separate plot.
Uhm, actually it's one of the saddest, most solemn
things that our staff have to undertake. Uhm, they
account for about 25 percent currently of annual
burials and uhm, it will take uhm generally more than
a year to uhm complete a plot with infants and field
remains.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: So, does it remain open?

MATTHEW BRUNE: It's covered throughout the
process.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Oh, throughout the process,
okay. Uhm, and these I'm assuming are babies
primarily that didn't make it to full term or?

MATTHEW BRUNE: Yes Deputy, it could be a range
of uhm an infant who did not survive more than a few
weeks, a few months or it could be uhm a stillborn.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Got it, okay. Wow, a lot of
information today. I think that we've learned; I
certainly have learned a lot through this process and
look forward to continuing to be helpful wherever I
can to ensure that you know families have greater
access to their loved ones. Maybe a little bit more
spontaneously and uh yeah, I think you know thank you
for coming today. I don't have any more questions.
I don't know Shekar, do you? Oh, we've been joined
by Council Member Riley. And so, thank you. Thank
you very much. We're going to take a five minute
bathroom break and then we'll be back.

MATTHEW BRUNE: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you everyone.

[BREAK 01:53:59-02:09:04]

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Can everybody settle down and
find a seat; we're getting ready to continue.

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Everybody settle down and find a seat; we are getting ready to continue.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I now open the hearing for public testimony. I remind members of the public that this is a government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times. The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table. Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant of Arms for inclusion into the hearing record.

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topics Hart Island Intro. 1408 and Resolution 775.

If you have a written statement or additional written testimony that you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms. You may also email written testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72

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hours of this hearing. Audio and video recordings
will not be accepted.

We will now call up our first panel Thomas Berner
and Melinda Hunt.

MELINDA HUNT: Can you hear me? Yes. Hi, so I'm
Melinda Hunt. I am President of the Hart Island
Project. I've been going to Hart Island documenting
the burials since 1991. I first started negotiating
with the Department of Correction for Family Access
and took a mother who was celebrating the 40th
Anniversary of her baby being buried on Hart Island
in 1994.

So, for over - I've been taking family members
there for over 30 years. The legislation that began
it was first introduced to transfer jurisdiction in
2012 came as a result of us creating an online
database of burials and family members discovering
what happened to their loved ones for the first time.
So, just the history of this legislation and I'm very
pleased to be here today with Vice President of the
organization Tom Berner, who is also connected to
Hart Island in that his family has Native American
roots to this property which belonged to his
ancestors who were Native Americans.

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1 So, uhm I'm really pleased that you are holding
2 this hearing and on behalf of the Hart Island
3 project, I strongly support in the Hart Island
4 project, strongly supports Intro. 1408. This
5 legislation represents a critical step towards
6 securing a sustainable and ethical future for city
7 burials. Over the past year, we have met with
8 members of the City Council to present Landscape of
9 Hope. A proof of concept developed in collaboration
10 with landscape architects at Ohio State University
11 and this plan demonstrates how New York City could
12 transition to individual burials on Hart Island,
13 preserving the nations largest green cemetery for
14 future generations.
15

16 This sustainable practice involves burial plots
17 dug just three feet deep instead of the current eight
18 feet deep. Using - may I continue?

19 Using data from the city's 2022 burial capacity
20 studies, researchers at OSU have concluded that the
21 Southern half of Hart Island is now unsuitable for
22 the deep trench burials. Associate professional of
23 Landscape Architecture Jake Foswell, I believe is
24 going to testify virtually and he will submit proof,
25 documents that show this problem that we've

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1 identified, which I hope 1408 will resolve. And I do
2 believe that the current rate that the Department of
3 Social Services is projecting is accurate. So,
4 they've also adjusted their members. The current -
5 the 2022 study projected that the removal of
6 buildings would create enough new burial space for 70
7 years. So, clearly that's flawed and it failed to
8 adequately address the risk in areas we call the
9 southern plain. This land is at elevations we're
10 digging eight foot trenches creates a liability due
11 to the rising water table, which is different from
12 the shoreline, okay. So, you can restore the
13 shoreline to keep the surface of Hart Island from
14 flooding but you're still going to get ground water.
15 And so, they found in the prior bill capacity study
16 that there was ground water seven feet below grade in
17 Test Pit 32. An area likely to be used for burial
18 within the next decade.

20 So, this is why you have to pass this bill. If
21 the water enters these caskets, there may still be
22 air and human remains that are not fully decomposed
23 and these will tend to float. This shifting will
24 cause the ground above to heave and rupture the
25 surface. Even the most basic capital improvements,

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such as the crust stone walls, benches and signage
planned by the Parks Department will be impacted by
this ground instability.

The problem with NYC Parks Concept Plan is its
failure to properly consider these likely occurrences
below the surface, therefore further study demanded
by Intro. 1408 is critical and a necessary step that
must be completed before any plans for the future of
Hart Island are finalized. Okay and I agree with
them that they need the 18 months as well.

As the nations largest municipal cemetery, Hart
Island is also the only green cemetery within the
five boroughs, providing a natural burial option for
New Yorkers who cannot afford the services of a
funeral director to take a body outside of the city.

City burials are environmentally superior because
they do not involve embalming, hardwood caskets, or
concrete vaults. However, the practice of mass
burial is widely considered offensive and we believe
it is time to revise the burial practice independent
of concerns for sea level rise.

It is no longer necessary to bury 200 boxes in
eight foot deep trenches, a practice that adversely
impacts communities across the city.

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We began meeting with NYC Parks in May 2023, well before the star White House Contract was awarded, to warn them that the scope of the plan was insufficient because it did not address the burial practice.

Although the plan claims to maximize the cemeteries life cycle and enhanced ecological systems and adapt to climate change, there is almost no indication of the rising water table underground. The shoreline restoration will keep water off the surface but it will not keep water out of the boxes buried eight feet deep.

Additionally, the proposal calls for extensive use of lawn grass, which is a poor choice for this location because it requires excessive watering and that contributes to the accumulation of water below. NYC Parks own guidelines for design and planning of flood resiliency call for planting meadow species, a recommendation that they should follow on Hart Island. So, everybody is talking about how Hart Island looks a lot better because of the mowing and the clean up but that actually is really not good for the burials themselves.

Whereas, if you plant meadow grasses, which have deeper roots, that will help to keep the soil in

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1 place and prevent erosion of these bones into the
2 Long Island Sound and make sure that we're able to
3 perform disinterment's. So, you do not want to be
4 planting grass out there because it's very sandy soil
5 and it dries out really quickly and so you have to
6 water all the time and you're just adding more water
7 to the ground water that's already there and rising
8 because of sea level rise.
9

10 New York State and this wasn't talked about
11 today, may soon permit the city to cremate unclaimed
12 remains after 90 days. There's current legislation
13 in Albany to allow municipalities to cremate. So,
14 this would really impact the city's options.
15 Probably uh, it would be very popular with New
16 Yorkers if the city could cremate.

17 So, we strongly believe that plans for Hart
18 Island should include storage and burial of cremains
19 and that if they are conducted by the city and if the
20 law permits cremation, the city should list both
21 cremations and burials in its publicly accessible
22 database that they were just talking about today and
23 provide access to a location on Hart Island where the
24 cremains have been deposited. So, that also needs to
25 be a part of the plan. If the city is going to

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1 cremate, where are you going to put the cremains
2 afterwards? If you're going to give them back to the
3 families, you're going to have an awful lot of
4 cremations that the taxpayers are going to pay for.
5 So, you need to do a cost analysis before you do
6 that.
7

8 While measures like lifting the cap on funeral
9 expenses are helpful, they will not resolve the
10 fundamental questions of how to provide a decent
11 burial or cremation for unclaimed remains. City
12 burials and cremations need to be a good choice
13 alongside private services that are paid for through
14 burial assistance. Thank you so much.

15 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Council Member Schulman has a
16 question.

17 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Yeah, I have a question.
18 Is the Parks Department working currently with you in
19 terms of their plans?

20 MELINDA HUNT: They have just now started
21 listening to us.

22 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay.

23 MELINDA HUNT: And I'm assuming that this
24 legislation that we both support means that we are
25 going to work together.

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CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay.

MELINDA HUNT: As much as possible. I mean,
really I just want things to be better for - I work
with hundreds of families, okay overtime and they
often are on their first visit to Hart Island when
they learn that their loved ones in a mass grave.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Right.

MELINDA HUNT: They - it's not clear to them when
they agree to a city burial that that's what they are
agreeing to. So, whatever you do needs to be
properly explained. So, if you're going to do lift
and deepen, which wouldn't happen until much later,
that needs to be explained as something that would
happen when the family agrees to a city burial. So,
you shouldn't do lift and deepen on the current
burials because the family didn't agree to that.

Although the city legally can do it, you probably
shouldn't do that.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Right.

MELINDA HUNT: And what we're recommending is
that if you only are digging down three feet, that
you can lay out the bodies individually and mark each
one with GPS. Not just the whole plot as they're
doing, so that you know the location of every single

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1 body and the family can navigate there using their
2 phone basically to know where their loved one is.
3 Not, you don't have to go out and see the spike in
4 the ground. The city knows exactly where that body
5 was placed. This is very simple technology and since
6 they built the database, they can add to that.
7

8 So, these are all things that we're going to hash
9 out but what you want is for them to consider a
10 variety of options at this point and then make
11 recommendations to the City Council. And then you
12 decide on how much you're going to fund and what
13 you're going to fund but I don't think you can do
14 even the visitor center, we don't know if that
15 location, if there will be burials fairly close by.
16 We want the ground to be stable in order to
17 facilitate visitation.

18 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Correct.

19 MELINDA HUNT: So, we need to know you know where
20 the ground water is and make more accurate
21 projections. So, that was missing from the Parks
22 Plan and so this legislation I think does resolve
23 that.
24
25

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CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay. Uhm, just let the
Committee, let us know if their not working with you
or you know - so that we can push on that.

MELINDA HUNT: Yes, well I think I mean, I've met
with many of you already in the past year and what
not and I think that's what helped us to be able to
meet with the agency. So, you know very slowly.
Since I started in 1991, the whole place has changed.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Okay.

MELINDA HUNT: Because the City Council started
paying attention to it. And you know before the fire
in 1977, there are letters from the Department of
Correction to the City Council asking them to help
them secure the burial ledgers which were out there
but the City Council didn't fund it.

CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Got it.

MELINDA HUNT: So, we lost all the burials from
1961 through July 1977 because the Department of
Correction moved off of Hart Island and vandals gone
on there and set fire to the wardens house and
destroyed all the records. That's what happened, so
it needs to be the agencies and the City Council and
the stakeholders, the public and the families all

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1 coming to the best solution, which isn't a perfect
2 solution.
3

4 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Right, of course.

5 MELINDA HUNT: But it's - it's we need to provide
6 a service that people feel comfortable with.

7 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Right, okay.

8 MELINDA HUNT: And these mass burials are no
9 longer acceptable culturally, right?

10 CHAIRPERSON SCHULMAN: Hmm, hmm, thank you so
11 much for all your work that you're doing on this,
12 appreciate it.

13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I had a question and it came
14 and left. Thank you. The next panel is Elaine
15 Joseph, Elsie Soto, Michael Hager, and Shirlene
16 Cooper.

17 ELAINE JOSEPH: Good afternoon. My name is
18 Elaine Joseph. In 1978, I had a baby girl who passed
19 away at a hospital in the city. Her body was lost in
20 the system between the hospital, the Medical
21 Examiners Office and is likely buried somewhere on
22 Hart Island. I say somewhere because the burial
23 records for babies between 1977 and 1981 have also
24 been lost. It took me 31 years to finally find out
25 where she is most likely buried.

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After advocating for gravesite visits on Hart Island since 2009, I was the first person to walk to a gravesite although the exact location was a guestimate location on March 14, 2014. I spend another five years advocating to have the jurisdiction of the island transferred from the Department of Correction, which was a living nightmare to the Department of Parks. This finally occurred in 2019. This was an improvement to the feeling of the visits but there is more that is needed to make the visit feel like it is a welcoming and Sareen cemetery. As it stands now, visits are conducted by the Department of Parks two days a month on weekends only.

I would like to be able to visit more often and have regularly scheduled weekday hours as well. I don't like the fact that I have to sign up in advance to make a visit and must list my guests and only permitted four guests. The time for a visit is also limited right now to about an hour or less since they have a bus that circles the island with other visitors and comes back to pick us up.

The Parks Department is using enforcement officers to escort people to their gravesites. When

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1 they have public visits, park rangers escort them and
2 they have a longer visit then families to avoid - to
3 have loved ones - they have a longer visit than
4 families have to a loved ones grave. It brings back
5 negative memories of having correction officers with
6 guns and handcuffs by my side while I'm at my baby's
7 gravesite.
8

9 I understand that there's an issue of
10 transporting people via a ferry to the island. It
11 would be most beneficial to those coming from all
12 boroughs to not have to come to City Island to gain
13 access to Hart Island. With all of the ferries we
14 now have in the city, there should be a way to figure
15 out how we can have a ferry from each borough. I
16 often sit along the walk way, the water way park on
17 the Queens side of the Throggs Neck Bridge and look
18 over at Hart Island and wish there was a simple ferry
19 I can board during the week to go and visit the grave
20 of my baby girl Tamika.

21 My final thoughts on the proposal to change the
22 burial procedures is to please not even consider
23 covering the current graves with layers of dirt and
24 burying additional bodies on top of the current
25 graves. After over 47 years, I've come to terms with

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the fact that my daughter is buried somewhere on Hart
Island and it would bring back all kinds of feelings
if I now had to deal with the fact that there are
bodies buried over hers. Thank you.

ELSIE SOTO: Hi everybody, good afternoon. My
name is Elsie Soto. I am Director of the Friends of
Hart Island. I am here not only as an advocate, but
also as a daughter and sister. My father Roberto
Soto passed away from HIV/AIDS complications in 1993
and more recently, in 2023, my brother, Morgan Soto,
passed from fentanyl poisoning. Both rest on Hart
Island. I live with those losses every day. I have
stood at the Hart Island Ferry gates placing locks in
memory of my loved ones. I have watched as other
visitors clutched flowers. Thank you. Have clutched
flowers and photographs of their loved ones as well.
I'm sorry.

The grief hits in specific moments. Like when I
stood in my cap and gown just graduating from
college, not being able to visit my father or my
brothers loved ones gravesite. It is those moments
that remind me of the restrictions needlessly placed
on someone's resting place. That aching reminder to
request a visit.

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Hart Island is historic. It holds generations of New Yorkers who are part of this beautiful city's fabric. It should be landmarked. It should be protected to preserve its dignity and ensure that what happened in the past is never repeated.

Many of us were not in this room when decisions about Hart Island were made but we are here today. We can make meaningful change in history by righting many wrongs that have caused families like mine pain and shame.

Today, we are asking for expanded visitation so families can mourn and connect more than twice a month, which also happens to be the same amount of visitations for public tours. We're also asking for landmark status to protect the entire island north, south, east, west, every grain of sand, every gravel that is considered Hart Island to be protected.

A GPS system to properly identify and preserve gravesites. I've submitted photos to Shekar Krishnan, and also Erik Bottcher's Office showing that on two separate visits within months of each other I was taken to two different areas. Where do I put my flowers? Where do I put my keepsakes? It's not fair. We are also asking for a family advisory

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committee, so that those directly affected, loved ones, families, have a real voice in the decisions about the islands future.

Finally, we strongly oppose any proposal that desecrates gravesites, whether it be adding soil over existing burials or disturbing those already laid to rest. To do so, would be deeply unethical and inhumane. Everyone laid to rest on Hart Island is a New Yorker and they deserve respect and dignity. Hart Island is not just about history; it is about humanity. Families like mine carry both the pain of loss and hope, true hope that this island will finally become a place of remembrance and respect.

I thank you all for being here. I thank you for listening and I thank you for standing with us to protect our loved ones. Thank you.

SHIRLENE COOPER: Good afternoon. My name is Shirlene Cooper. I was born and raised in Fort Greene projects in Brooklyn New York. My cousin, Benjamin Bumper, a couple of years my senior, would always come by to visit me. He loved to eat and dance to the Floaters song Float On. Many years later, I found out he was homeless and passed away in the New York City Subway Train Station.

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We were not contacted or informed of his death by anyone and he was transported to Hart Island known as Potters Field. My family was devastated to hear this unfortunate news because had we known he would have been given a more proper burial and last resting place. There is no excuse for this inappropriate occurrence and miscommunication of lost family members. Once he was identified, we should have been contacted immediately. My heart goes out to those who have similar issues with loved ones buried in Hart Island. And I just wanted to add, uhm I'm a person living with HIV and AIDS. I was diagnosed in 1996 after losing my son at the age of two in 1995 when there were no medications available.

I am currently the first Black woman to sit on the City Council's HIV/AIDS service administrations advisory board for 23 years. I worked side by side by Commissioners for years discussing Hart Island and how the burials are done and how they operate, including the former Commissioner Matthew Brune who I have just seen for many years later. They do have a chat worker system, which is held on Thursday's where and it's called Chat Workers Comprehensive Health Assessment Team. So, that's a team of special case

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workers who assist when people have deaths or burials
and they need help and assistance with burying their
loved ones.

I would like to ask you all to meet with HASA to
make sure that these burials are being properly held
and that the families are being informed properly.
Most of these families don't even know where their
families are buried. I just found out this year by
joining Ready, Aim, Innovate, and Elsie's Hart Island
project. My cousin has been in the ground for 34
years. He died January 3, 1991. I just found out a
month ago. Just because I entered this project and I
think it's a shame that families are missing loved
ones. You have Veterans Day, you have Jane's, you
have John Doe's, you have low income families who do
not have the luxury of life insurance. We need to be
informed. How do you contact us?

And I just wanted to say thank you all for this
opportunity.

MICHAEL HAGER: Good afternoon. My name is
Michael Hager. I am a resident of Member Bottcher's
district. I too am a person living with HIV for more
than half my life now and I'm the founder and CEO of
Ready and Innovate. We center individual and

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community narratives to drive change. The most important thing in life is people and the essence of a person is their story. RAI created the Friends of Hart Island project to explore what it means to have death with dignity through story telling. Afterall, death is one of the most important parts of life. Challenging as it is, we often don't pay attention to end of life issues until it's too late. It is difficult to talk about death. It is difficult for America's greatest city to handle pandemics, poverty and human need on such a grand scale. Even so, people deserve dignity in death.

Americans have expectations about what it means to be laid to rest, to be able to grieve. To be able to visit their deceased loved ones. These expectations are routinely not met currently when it comes to Hart Island. Are the folks laid to rest there less valuable to New York? There are war heroes laid to rest there and history.

Are those resting on Hart Island less of a New Yorker than any of the rest of us? Every single zip code and every single population in New York city has a connection to this island. It is not easy to think of a way forward but we are begging New York City

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Hall and government to consider the humanity, the history, and the need to recognize the countless contributions of our friends, family, and neighbors laid to rest in Hart Island.

Do not move graves. Do not stack graves. Do not prioritize the public over grieving families. Do not allow the remains of our loved ones to be sent out of state pursuant to the legislation before the state house. Be the change we need. Bring the dignity to our loved ones laid to rest on Hart Island. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much for your testimony. I just wanted to say how moving it was to hear from each of you, your powerful words, your view points and your stories and I want you all to know that your loved ones who are buried at Hart Island, whether they be children or parents or siblings, their lives mattered. They are New Yorkers. Their final resting places matter and I have been moved and I know I speak for all of us in the City Council when I say, I have been moved to hear those stories, to work with you all and to find away that together we can make sure that the purpose of Hart Island is to honor those who are buried there like your relatives

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1 and we will continue to work to make sure that's the
2 case. Your voices today have been heard loud and
3 clear. Your work that you've done to advocate for
4 your relatives there has impacted all of us and
5 continues to do so. The idea as you mentioned, like
6 a family advisory committee or other suggestions, I
7 think are good ideas that we should follow up on
8 together with the Parks Department and every city
9 agency that has a row at Hart Island. But all of
10 that comes from knowing first and foremost and
11 wanting to make sure you all know that for all of us
12 and for us on our City Council here, your loved ones
13 who are there, their stories, their lives, their
14 final resting places matter and we hold that in the
15 highest regard and we honor them as we do this work.
16 Thank you all so much.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: I have a question. Were you
19 ever able to determine where exactly your family was
20 buried? There was some confusion about the location.

21 ELSIE SOTO: Yes, so I was taken to the correct
22 gravesite but however, there's the plots and in one
23 point in my father's specific plot in 231, they added
24 basically a pole I guess to give them some sort of
25 reference point. Uhm in one of the photos that I

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1 have in October, the - I'll just use the napkins if
2 you will. This is the actual pole that they put as a
3 reference point in the gravesite. In October, the
4 marker was put over here. In December, it was put in
5 here. Same year, a couple months later, what's the
6 difference? There's a huge difference. Where I put
7 my flowers. Where do I put the sand when I visit
8 Puerto Rico? I can't bring my dad to Puerto Rico but
9 I try to bring a little bit to him and it's important
10 to me and it's important to everyone who has a loved
11 one resting on the island. The least that they could
12 do is give us a little bit of accuracy. GPS system
13 is an open source, program. Anyone can do it. I
14 mean, I'm willing to do it at this point and I think
15 that you know just even what HRA was saying earlier,
16 when my brother was interred on the island, I did
17 that process because my mom was just too grief
18 stricken to even to even comprehend what was
19 happening because his loss was very sudden. We were
20 not informed at all that the graves went from 150 to
21 200. It was actually a Parks Department employee
22 that gave me that information. Not HRA, not when we
23 were talking over the phone asking you know various
24 questions and doing the interment process.
25

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1 I was never told that. Would it have made a
2 difference? Absolutely. I already have issues on
3 where I'm putting my fathers flowers. Now I have my
4 brother also to worry about.
5

6 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, see my concern with
7 that is this is why we asked the question about
8 whether or not there had been any cases where bodies
9 were misidentified and you know remains of the wrong
10 person were given to a family because if we can't
11 accurately determine where exactly a body is, then
12 how do we know for sure that we are delivering the
13 remains of their family to them? Like, I don't see
14 how we don't make that mistake.

15 ELSIE SOTO: Right and I also want to bring up
16 another tiny concern about any proposals moving
17 forward that have to do with adding a burial on top
18 of other graves. I mean, how are we supposed to keep
19 track if we can't keep track of what we have right
20 now? You know and people lose faith in the city and
21 their agencies to do the proper thing.

22 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, yeah, no I agree.
23 Thank you guys so much for coming in and sharing your
24 stories with us. I mean, we've learned a lot today
25 and I think that the objective here is to be able to

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pass resolutions that - an introduction of bills that
really help to address a lot of these concerns as
well. Thank you.

PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

SHIRLENE COOPER: Yeah, so for me, just my family
is grieving him now. He died in '91. This is a
whole new agenda that I had to open up and I was the
one that had to bring it to them. I had to call his
sisters down south. I had to call everybody up here
and this is his burial right here. This is his
funeral right here right now because he didn't have
one and no one knows and everybody is sad. I'm
getting calls from everybody. I'm like, I don't even
know what to do with this right now. What am I - I
can't change it. It happened in '91. No one told us
and now we're having a funeral for him now, a
memorial for him now, 31 years later.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, yeah. And just a final
question; I didn't think to occur to ask this but for
those of you that are visiting, when you're visiting,
is the ferry full to capacity?

SHIRLENE COOPER: No.

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1
2 ELSIE SOTO: I've been on several visits for
3 prior to DOC as well as Parks and every visit that
4 I've been on there has been points where even Parks
5 employees have to stand on the bus because they don't
6 have a place to sit and they have the first four rows
7 uhm are supposed to be - are reserved for Parks
8 employees. So, they're the ones that are standing on
9 these buses. I believe that it's full to capacity.
10 I know that I have a visit on Sunday, we have 35
11 visits. We have 35 visitors, so you know the need is
12 there.

13 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, yeah, there's a need
14 for it. Yeah, I thought it was weekly. I didn't
15 realize that it was just once a month.

16 ELSIE SOTO: Yeah, two times a month and you know
17 I'm also very conscious of yes, I want to visit my
18 loved one but I'm also conscious of other people who
19 want to visit their loved one and if I take that
20 space, they won't have their visit. So, please
21 understand that yeah, we are very conscious of that
22 as loved ones as well that want to visit our family
23 members.

24 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, no it robs us also
25 right of the ability to properly mourn our loved

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1 ones. Because I know you know when I go to the
2 cemetery to visit you know my mom, like I like to sit
3 there with her for a little while and I like to play
4 music that she enjoyed you know listening to and
5 sometimes you know if I want to cry and I don't want
6 to cry around my family members, I want to go there
7 and sit there and you know pray and cry and do all of
8 the things that are healing to me as well as a person
9 that's going through the grieving process. So, I can
10 only imagine the indignity of having to do that or to
11 not be able to do that because you're now surrounded
12 by so many unfamiliar faces and it takes away your
13 right to have the private moment. But thank you,
14 thank you all so much.

15
16 PANEL: Thank you.

17 ELSIE SOTO: I just wanted to quickly say, I do
18 give Parks Department kudos. Their staff has always
19 been extremely gracious to us. It's not an easy
20 environment to work in and I do believe that they are
21 doing the best that they can and any room for
22 improvement is also welcomed but I just want to make
23 that very clear that Parks Department is definitely
24 doing a good job.

25

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yeah, I know I have been on a
couple of visits and I agree.

ELSIE SOTO: Yeah, thank you everyone.

PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Okay, we're going
to briefly move to our Zoom uhm participants, Jake
Boswell and Alan Joseph.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

JAKE BOSWELL: Hi, thanks. Can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Yes.

JAKE BOSWELL: Hi. Thank you for hearing my
testimony today. My name is Jake Boswell. I'm an
Associate Professor at Landscape Architecture at Ohio
State.

For the last two years, my colleagues and I have
been working with Melinda Hunt and the Hart Island
Project. On an analysis of the 2022 burial capacity
study in relation to the proposed master plan, which
has now been released as the Hart Island Concept
plan.

I want to express my support of Intro. 1408. The
2022 burial capacity study is a deeply flawed
document. It should be redone before concrete
decisions are made about the island's future. The

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2022 study offers only a cursory assessment of burial
options beyond the current method of mass burial. It
bases its future projections on historically low
burial numbers and it fails to consider the broader
human dimensions of the city's mass burial practices.
Most jarringly the study fails to consider the
existing ground water levels or projected sea level
rise. As shown in figures one through seven of the
testimony that I've submitted, over 20 percent of the
burial sites planned in the 2022 capacity study will
experience significant ground water intrusion by 2080
if not earlier.

Given this information, the city should avoid on
relying on low laying areas of the island for future
burials, especially for eight foot deep mass graves.
In fact, it may be already necessary for the city to
take steps to mitigate mass graves that are already
situated in these vulnerable zones.

The 2025 Concept Plan advances many necessary
projects for the island. However, it unfortunately
compounds the issues of the 2022 capacity study by
outlining future buildings, facilities, and roads
without questioning the capacity study's conclusions
about burial methods or the timelines it sets out.

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1 You have options beyond mass burial. By exploring
2
3 different burial methods, my team and I have
4 demonstrated -

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony.
6 Time has expired.

7 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You can continue. I'm sorry,
8 you could wrap up.

9 JAKE BOSWELL: Uhm, we've been able to show that
10 the city could extend the life of Hart Island by
11 adopting a practical form of green burial. Figures
12 eight through ten of the submitted testimony
13 illustrate our idea and how it could work. This
14 approach would allow the city to utilize much more of
15 the island for future burials, including higher
16 ground on the northern half. Using this method, we
17 believe the city could ensure that Hart Island
18 remains an active burial site indefinitely.

19 We think our solution is more practical and
20 compassionate than current mass burial practices.
21 Our plan also offers better environmental outcomes
22 and creates a more respectful and comforting space
23 for visiting families and we call that proposal
24 Landscape of Hope.

25

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1
2 In carrying out this work, our hope is only that
3 it prompts the city to reconsider its burial
4 practices on Hart Island. Alternatives are possible.
5 For the very practical reasons I have laid out here
6 today and in a submitted testimony, it's time for the
7 City of New York to end mass burial on Hart Island.
8 Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Alan Joseph.

10 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

11 ALAN JOSEPH: Okay, thank you very much for
12 giving me this opportunity. I learned about Hart
13 Island a couple of ways. My partner actually lived
14 there many years ago and uh we were introduced to the
15 Hart Island project and Melinda Hunt. We
16 participated in a number of the meetings that she's
17 had and that Landscape of Hope project that Jake
18 spoke about.

19 It is very, very impressive in my opinion. Hart
20 Island as I've come to learn, has made a significant
21 contribution to New York City, both historically and
22 in practice. You touched on it earlier on but
23 basically the history goes back centuries, centuries
24 from the Native Americans who lived there to the
25 Civil War to uhm to the missile site there to Phoenix

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1 House, the Rehab Center. There was for a short
2 period of time an amusement park that was proposed
3 that from minorities that unfortunately never got off
4 the ground, many years ago as well. It has a strong,
5 strong, historical statement and I agree with some of
6 the other participants who basically are stating that
7 uh Hart Island should be a landmark site because of
8 the history that's there.

10 I support Melinda Hunt, the Hart Island Project
11 and that Landscape of Hope. I've watched the
12 development and the change at Hart Island over the
13 years since the Parks took it over. I just wish more
14 of the histories, the buildings would have been able
15 to be saved but we can't undo -

16 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony.
17 Time is expired.

18 CHAIRPERSON AYALA: You can wrap up. You can
19 wrap up.

20 ALAN JOSEPH: I believe progress is being made but
21 uhm, I think that the master plan needs to take into
22 account all the various options for a long future,
23 not just a quick and easy way out. So, I would
24 support the landscape, the whole project and ask you
25 take a look at it seriously. Thank you very much.

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CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Our next in
person panel will be Tabitha Ward, Steven Lopez. Is
there a Steven Lopez? Okay and Delamar Leon. Okay
Ms. Ward, you can begin.

TABITHA WARD: Yes, my name is Tabitha Ward and
forgive me but I have something to say that is off
topic so I'm going to be very brief. I won't even
take up the two minutes but I have submitted a
proposal for the housing voucher recipients to
directly receive housing vouchers for the award
amounts deposited onto their benefit cards or onto
their checking accounts. I do apologize that this
isn't the correct panel, however, I received the
information later date that the actual panel had been
deferred or canceled today. Apologies.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, appreciate it. Thank
you.

DELAMAR LEON: Hi New York City Council Members.
My name is Delamar Leon and I am here to represent -
to actually bring up a very important matter that I
think needs to be considered. A New York City judge
recently determined that a pet is considered a family
member. I am here to lend a voice to all the New
York City known as borough bred. Unclaimed bodies of

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1 dogs, pets, that have found themselves against their
2 will under the care of the New York City Animal Care
3 Center. Where far too many who have been young,
4 healthy and with very strong desire to live have lost
5 their lives unnecessarily. Does the city know or
6 have a plan in place where the unclaimed stray dogs
7 and pets who are killed at New York City animal care
8 center go after they are killed?
9

10 I also would like to formerly ask the Health
11 Committee at New York City Council to prioritize this
12 matter and ask for an Animal Welfare and Oversight
13 Committee to be created and an oversight hearing to
14 be scheduled as soon as possible to assess the
15 mishandling of our animals under the New York City
16 Animal Care and Control Center.

17 And with that, I closed my statements. I highly
18 encourage all of you members to consider this matter
19 as an emergency. I have dealt for the past year,
20 strictly every single day of my life, 24/7 left the
21 animals that have been representing in the kill
22 shelters in California because the matter has become
23 an emer- like serious matter. No oversight, no one
24 to report to and no one cares to hear the outcome of
25

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these animals. No one is representing them. So,
here I am in their behalf.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Thank you. Thank you so
much. Thank you for coming to testify today.

DELAMAR LEON: And perhaps even consider a burial
site for these animals because that would actually
give some sort of accountability as to what happens
to the bodies of these animals and cannot be mis
properly used for other purposes.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Okay, no we appreciate it and
we will take that into consideration. Thank you so
much.

DELAMAR LEON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON AYALA: Uhm, at this time, If there
is anyone here who would like to testify, please
complete the witness slip with the Sergeant at Arms
so that we may call you.

If any witnesses had registered and did not
testify, please raise your hand. No, okay. Alright,
at this time, seeing on other people here to testify,
this hearing is adjourned. [GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date November 28, 2025