

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES
Of the
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
JOINTLY WITH THE
COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

----- X

MAY 5, 2021
Start: 1:30 P.M.
Recess: 3:43 P.M.

HELD AT: REMOTE HEARING VIRTUAL ROOM 2

B E F O R E: CHAIR MARK LEVINE AND CHAIR PETER KOO

COUNCIL MEMBERS: MARK LEVINE
PETER KOO
JUSTIN BORELLI
OSWALDO FELIZ
DARMA DIAZ
MATHIEU EUGENE
ALICKA AMPRY-SAMUEL
INEZ BARRON
JAMES GENNARO
JAMES VAN BRAMER
FRANCISCO MOYA
MARK GJONAJ
KEVIN RILEY
CARLINA RIVERA
DIANA AYALA
ERIC DINOWITZ
SELVENA BROOK-POWERS
ERIC ULRICH
ROBERT HOLDEN

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

SAM BIEDERMAN
DINA MONIOTIS
DANA WAX
PATRICIA LYONS
NATASHA GODBY
NICOLE DONIGER-STROM
MATT DRURY
EDWINA FRANCES MARTIN
AMY KOPLOW
JAMES DONOFRIO
CATHY CEBEK
THERESA KURTZ
MELINDA HUNT
BARBARA BURN DOLENSEK
STUART SORELL

2

3 SGT. BRADLEY: Recording is up.

4 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Cloud is started.

5 SGT. PEREZ: Backup is rolling.

6 SGT. MARTINEZ: Good afternoon and

7 welcome today's remote New York City Council hearing
8 of the Committee on Health jointly with the Committee
9 on Parks and Recreation. At this time, would all
10 panelists please turn on their video for verification
11 purposes. To minimize disruption, please silence
12 your electronic devices and if you wish to submit
13 testimony, you may do so via email at the following
14 address, testimony@council.nyc.gov. Thank you for
15 your cooperation. We are ready to begin.

16 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you, Sergeant
17 Martinez and welcome everyone. We appreciate your
18 patience for a rare technical delay in the Council's
19 online hearing. We didn't have these things when we
20 met in the Council Chamber. One more reason why I
21 can't wait to see you all in person again soon. I'm
22 really excited to be co-chairing this hearing with my
23 colleague, Council Member Peter Koo and I want to
24 acknowledge our colleagues who are joining us here.
25 We have Council Member Borelli, Council Member Feliz,

2 Council Member Diaz, Council Member Eugene, Council
3 Member Ampry-Samuel, Council Member Barron, Council
4 Member Brannon, Council Member Gennaro, Council
5 Member Van Bramer, Council Member Moya, Council
6 Member Gjonaj, Council Member Riley, Council Member
7 Rivera, Council Member Ayala, Council Member
8 Dinowitz, and Council Member Brook-Powers. Committee
9 Counsel, have I missed any of our colleagues? I
10 think we've got all of you, but if, we'll make sure
11 to come back and acknowledge you shortly. I'm going
12 to read a somewhat truncated version of my opening
13 statement so we can make up for a little bit of the
14 lost time. I am thrilled that we are convening this
15 hearing today, a joint hearing of the Committee of
16 Health the Parks Committee and our topic today is the
17 future of Harts Island, our public burial process and
18 the assistance the our city offers for people who
19 cannot afford a burial on their own, and as you know,
20 for over 150 years, the Department of Correction has
21 maintain and operated New York City's public cemetery
22 on Hart Island off the coast of City Island in the
23 Bronx. The cemetery occupies 101 acres and is
24 reported the largest tax payer funded cemetery in the
25 world. By many estimations, there are over one

2 million people buried on Hart Island. Over the past
3 decade 1000 to 1200 decedents are buried on Hart
4 Island per year, including adults, children, and
5 fetuses. According to DOC records, in 2020 that
6 number doubled, 2200 and 10 adults and children
7 received a public burial there. 875 adults were
8 buried on Hart Island in April 2020 alone. We held a
9 hearing on Hart Island in 2019 which I co-chaired in
10 which the Council passed a package of legislation
11 addressing issues like transferring jurisdiction of
12 Hart Island from DOC to Parks examining
13 transportation to and from Hart Island, development
14 of an office of burial services, and mandating a
15 hearing on public bail operations. The Human
16 Resource Administration is in the process of
17 determining next steps for Hart Island with a
18 transfer date of July 1, 2021, rapidly approaching,
19 and we look forward to hearing more about this
20 transfer in today's hearing. We're also going to
21 focus on the process of financial assistance for
22 those who can't afford a burial, and there we have
23 data which is very disturbing. Of 3589 applications
24 received, only 357 were approved. Most of these
25 applications were denied because of lack of

2 documentation, and of course, we find this deeply
3 disturbing, and we want to understand how we can
4 reduce these barriers. I think I'm going to skip to
5 the end, again because we're so far behind on time.
6 I want to acknowledge that we've been joined also,
7 nope, we've got all the Council Members, that's good,
8 so finally let me just conclude by thanking our staff
9 of the Health Committee who has worked very, very
10 hard to prepare for today, including Counsels Harbani
11 Ahuja and Sara Liss; Policy Analyst, Ann Balkin
12 (SP?); Finance Analyst, Lauren Hunt (SP?); and Data
13 Analyst, Brooke Frye (SP?) and Rachael Alexandroff
14 (SP?), and well as Ben Witt (SP?) for all their hard
15 work in preparing for this hearing, and now I'm going
16 to pass it off to our colleague, Chair Peter Koo.

17 CHAIR KOO: Thank you, and thank you
18 Chair Levine. Good afternoon, I'm Peter Koo, Chair
19 of the City Council's Committee on Parks and
20 Recreation. I'd like to welcome you to our virtual
21 hearing where we will examine the state of the Hart
22 Island transfer to the Parks Department true addition
23 and updates to the public burial process. I would
24 like to thank my colleague, Council Member Mark
25 Levine for holding this hearing jointly. Hart Island

2 has been a subject of quite concern to New Yorkers
3 for many years. The island has had various uses over
4 the years including the operation of several jails, a
5 sanitarium, a cold war missile base, and we have
6 center for people addicted to narcotics. Currently,
7 it is still used as the city's hardest field which
8 over a million people have been buried there over the
9 years. Since it has been used as a public burial
10 location, numerous issues were raised that gave rise
11 to a reformed movement. The most problematic issue
12 was that the island was under the control of the
13 Department of Corrections, DOC, which has expertise
14 with inmate custody not cemetery maintenance. This
15 involvement justifiably involved security concerns
16 that require family members visiting the graves of
17 their loved ones to be accompanied by DOC staff.
18 This negatively affected the visitation experience.
19 That is why the Council added in 2019, to pass
20 numerous Bills for the city to find a way to run this
21 facility in a more humane way. One billion
22 particular, Local Law 2010 of 2019 will transfer to
23 addition of Hart from the Department of Corrections
24 to the Parks Department by July 1st, this year. This
25 puts in place an agency that has more expertise on

2 managing land and public access. It is my hope and
3 the hope of so many who have advocated for reform to
4 Hart Island that pass jurisdiction will result in
5 making it easier and more welcoming for the next of
6 kin and the public to visit Hart Island. However,
7 Parks cannot do this alone. While Parks Department
8 has the expertise to help develop parts of the island
9 into accessible open space. It does not have
10 expertise in managing cemeteries or conducting
11 burials. This is why you would take a citywide
12 (inaudible) to transform Hart Island into a location
13 that honors and respects those who would like to
14 visit their deceased loved ones. Numerous issues
15 remain unsolved including obtaining accessible data
16 on the number and demographics of COVID victims who
17 have been buried on the island. The status of the
18 process with determining who should be conducting the
19 burials long term, determining what structures must
20 be demolished or otherwise be saved and what the
21 timeline is for increasing accessibility and public
22 amenities on the island. I look forward to examining
23 way by which these various agencies including Parks
24 Department, transportation, OCMG, Department of
25 Corrections and HRA can all work together to plan and

2 implement a long-term strategy to update our island
3 and improve the cities public burial process. Thank
4 you very much, and welcome. Back to you, Chair
5 Levine.

6 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you. I think I'll
7 pass it off to the Committee Counsel at this point
8 for swearing in, for affirmation for Administration
9 testimony.

10 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Yes, thank you.
11 Hi everyone. My name is Ann Balkin. My pronouns are
12 they, them, and I'm the Senior Policy Analyst for the
13 Committee on Health for the New York City Council.
14 Before we begin, I want to remind everyone that you
15 will be on mute until you are called on to testify
16 when you will be unmuted by the host. I will be
17 calling on panelist to testify, so please listen for
18 your name to be called. I will be periodically
19 announcing who the next panelist will be. For
20 everyone testifying today, please note that there may
21 be a few seconds of delay before you are unmuted.
22 So, we thank you in advance for your patience, and as
23 a reminder, all hearing participants should submit
24 their written testimony@council.nyc.gov. At the
25 today's hearing, the first panel will be

2 representatives from the administration, followed by
3 Council Member questions and then the public will
4 testify. During the hearing, if Council Members
5 would like to ask a question, please use the Zoom
6 raise hand function and I will call on you in the
7 order in which you have raised your hands. I will
8 now call on members of the Administration to testify.
9 Testimony will be provided by Patricia Lyons, Deputy
10 Commissioner for Financial Facility and Fleet
11 Administration at the Department of Correction;
12 Natasha Godby, the Deputy Commissioner of Emergency
13 and Intervention Services at HRA; and Nicole Doniger
14 Strom, Chief of Staff and Acting Emergency and
15 Intervention Services Executive Director of Special
16 Projects at HRA. Additionally, the following the
17 representatives will be available for answering
18 questions: Sam Biederman, the Chief of Staff and
19 Assistance Commissioner for Community Outreach and
20 Partnership at NYC Parks; Dina Maniotis, the
21 Executive Deputy Commissioner of OCME; and Dana Wax,
22 the Deputy Chief of Staff at the Department of
23 Correction. Before we begin, I will administer the
24 oath. I will call on each of you individually for a
25 response, so please raise your right hands. Do you

1 COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

11

2 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
3 nothing but the truth in your testimony before this
4 Committee and to respond honestly to Council Member
5 questions? Deputy Commissioner Lyons.

6 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: I
7 do.

8 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Deputy
9 Commissioner Goby.

10 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: I do.

11 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Acting EIS
12 Executive Director Nicole Doniger Strom.

13 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER
14 STROM: I do. Doniger.

15 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Oh, Doniger, I'm
16 sorry. Thank you.

17 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER
18 STROM: That's okay.

19 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Assistant
20 Commissioner Sam Biederman.

21 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN: I
22 do.

23 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Executive Deputy
24 Commissioner Dina Maniotis.

25

1 COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

12

2 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

3 MANIOTIS: I do.

4 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: And the Deputy
5 Chief of Staff Dana Wax.

6 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: I do.

7 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you all.
8 Deputy Commissioner Lyons, you may begin when ready.

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS:
10 Thank you. Good afternoon, Chair Levine, Chair Koo,
11 and Members of the Committee on Health and Committee
12 on Parks and Recreation. I am Patricia Lyons, Deputy
13 Commissioner for Financial Facilities and Fleet
14 Administration at the Department of Correction, and I
15 am joint this afternoon by Dana wax, Deputy Chief of
16 Staff. Thank you for the opportunity to testify
17 today to discuss current Hart Island Operations, the
18 work the Department has done to maintain operations
19 over the course of the pandemic and our support and
20 the transfer of the solemn responsibility of caring
21 for those interred on Hart Island to the Department
22 of Parks and Recreation and operations around city
23 burials to the Department of Social Services. As per
24 the city charter, the Department of Correction has
25 been responsible for the management of Hart Island,

2 the city's potter's field until the passage of Local
3 Law 2010 which transfers the management of Hart
4 Island to our agency partners. In that time, we've
5 worked faithfully to bury those interred on Hart
6 Island with dignity and have provided opportunities
7 for the public to visit their loved one's final
8 resting place. The Department of Correction also
9 works with families and the Office of the Medical
10 Examiner to provide disinterment as requested. The
11 Department of Correction also maintains a public data
12 base with the names of those interred on Hart Island
13 to support family members searching for their loved
14 one's final resting place. In April of last year,
15 the city contracted with a vendor to provide burial
16 services on the island allowing the department to
17 transition away from having people in custody perform
18 burials. At the end of 2020, we switched to hiring
19 laborer specifically for this service. To be very
20 clear, people in custody are not performing burials
21 and have not performed them in over a year. All
22 staff performing burials are provided with
23 appropriate PPE including N95s, masks, boots, and
24 Tyvek suits. Although this has been a challenging
25 year, I'm proud to say that all burial operations

2 have run smoothly and without interruption over the
3 past year. In light of the pandemic, visitation to
4 Hart Island has been suspended since last spring. To
5 support families of those buried on Hart Island
6 during these difficult and physically distant times,
7 the department's Executive Chaplin began residing
8 over all burials in May 2020. He has attended each
9 burial since that time and also offers prayers and
10 support to the staff performing this difficult work.
11 Every Friday, he holds an interfaith web-service with
12 religious leaders across the city so that all
13 religions, all languages are represented in honoring
14 those laid to rest on Hart Island. I am proud to
15 share with the Council today that we will reinstate
16 limited monthly visit to Hart Island beginning May
17 15. The Department agrees that the process of city
18 burials and the maintenance of Hart Island are better
19 suited for agencies whose mission more closely aligns
20 with this work. For the past year, we have met
21 regularly with the Department of Parks and Recreation
22 and the Department of Social Services to share
23 everything from blueprints of the island to our
24 learned best practices. We will continue to be good
25 partners throughout this transition and will continue

2 to share our institutional knowledge with our sister
3 agencies. I will now turn to Deputy Commissioner
4 Natasha Godby of the Department of Social Services to
5 speak to their work as operations are transitioned.

6 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Good
7 afternoon. I would like to thank the City Council's
8 Parks and Recreation Committee, the Health Committee
9 and their Chairs for giving us the opportunity to
10 testify. Today, we are here to speak about the Human
11 Resource Administration and our work on the burial
12 assistance for New Yorkers in need and Hart Island
13 operations. My name is Natasha Godby, Deputy
14 Commissioner Emergency and Intervention Services.
15 I'm joined by my colleague, Nicole Doniger Strom,
16 HRA, Chief of Staff and Acting Emergency and
17 Intervention Services Executive Director of Special
18 Projects. The New York City Department of Social
19 Services Human Resources Administration is the
20 nation's largest social services agency. Each year,
21 we assist more than three million New Yorkers through
22 the administration of 12 public assistance programs
23 including burial assistance. Every day, in all five
24 boroughs, HRA provides essential programs and
25 supports to low-income New Yorkers and administering

2 these programs, HRA is at the forefront of this
3 administration's efforts to combat poverty and
4 address homelessness. Today, we are here to update
5 the Committee on HRA's burial assistance programs and
6 their impact on New Yorkers in need during these
7 challenging times. Pursuant to the New York State
8 Social Services Law and Regulations and city
9 implementation rules, HRA provides financial
10 assistance to individuals to help meet funeral
11 expenses. These funds are made available when a
12 resident of New York City passes away who was either
13 receiving or eligible receive cash assistance or
14 Supplemental Security Income, SSI, and leaves no
15 funds to cover their burial expenses and there are no
16 legally responsible relatives who are able to pay
17 such expenses. This assistance is critical to many
18 New Yorkers who lack adequate funds to support their
19 loved ones and ensures a burial or a cremation.
20 Accessibility to these programs is important which is
21 why we have worked to reform the burial assistance
22 program to ease the administrative and financial
23 burden of grieving families at a time when they are
24 coping with the loss of their loved one. The crux of
25 the burial assistance program is to ensure vulnerable

2 New Yorkers have access to financial assistance.
3 These Reforms put us in good stead as our city began
4 to face the impacts of the current public health
5 emergency.

6 Burial Assistance during COVID-19.
7 Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, our agency has
8 reviewed existing policies across the board to see
9 where we can adapt most effectively and do more for
10 New Yorkers in need. Over the past year, we have
11 implemented sweeping reforms at a scale and speed
12 never before seen to ensure the New Yorkers who count
13 on us remain connected to essential benefits and
14 don't have to worry about losing services, which is
15 more important than ever. For example, as part of
16 our top-to-bottom overhaul to make services and
17 supports easier to access, last Spring/Summer, we
18 reviewed our burial services policies with a focus on
19 how this program could go even further to support
20 vulnerable New Yorkers. After a review of existing
21 policies, and despite the fact that the State has not
22 increased the grant level for the State-set public
23 burial allowance in years, we took immediate steps
24 within our city's power to make this vital resource
25 available to more New Yorkers, including nearly

2 doubling the value of this grant, ultimately
3 providing more help to families when they need it
4 most. As this emergency continues, we are committed
5 to continuing to do everything we can to adapt our
6 policies to meet this moment. To that end, even in
7 the absence of a state grant increase, we're making
8 the reforms implemented last year permanent, so that
9 the New Yorkers we serve can continue to access this
10 increased amount of local burial assistance. Prior
11 to the policy shifts we implemented last year, the
12 funeral allowance was \$900, which is the amount, set
13 by State law, towards which the State will provide
14 reimbursement. As noted, in response to the
15 pandemic, in Spring/Summer 2020, we took immediate
16 steps within our city's power to temporarily increase
17 the value of this allowance from \$900 to \$1,700, with
18 the increase funded by the City. This action nearly
19 doubled this public assistance grant, making this
20 vital resource go further for more New Yorkers in
21 need during these unprecedented times. Moreover, we
22 put in place several reforms, such as extending the
23 application period to 120 days from the date of death
24 and allowed applications to be submitted by email and
25 other remote means, in addition to in-person. Under

2 State regulation, local social services districts can
3 only provide this burial allowance grant if the total
4 cost of the funeral/burial is less than an overall
5 local district cost cap. The City's cap for many
6 years was \$1,700, and as we increased the monetary
7 value of assistance, we are providing to New Yorkers
8 through the burial grant from \$900 to \$1,700, we also
9 increased the required cap from \$1,700 to \$3,400.
10 This increased cap is now a permanent feature of the
11 program. These reforms mean that HRA is able to
12 provide up to \$1,700 in funeral allowance for
13 funerals and burials, nearly twice the previous
14 amount, where the related costs do not exceed \$3,400,
15 or twice the previous cap, excluding certain
16 expenses. This funeral allowance can be used for
17 services such as: funeral arrangements, burials,
18 cremations, and services, and is responsive to New
19 Yorker's range of unique needs. We are proud to
20 announce that these reforms are all either already
21 permanent or soon will be. We have published a
22 proposed rule that would extend the \$1,700 grant
23 indefinitely, making it a permanent feature of HRA's
24 burial allowance program even as we continue to
25 advocate for an increase in the inadequate State

2 grant reimbursement level. Now, I would like to turn
3 it over to my colleague, Nicole Doniger Strom, who
4 can provide updates on Hart Island.

5 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

6 STROM: Thank you, Natasha. I would also like to
7 thank the Council for your work and advocacy on
8 behalf of New Yorkers in need. As we work to rebuild
9 our city with a focus on equity, ensuring New Yorkers
10 can access quality services, we must also bring this
11 spirit of reform to end-of-life planning. We remain
12 committed to ensuring New Yorkers are provided with
13 an appropriate and dignified location to be laid to
14 rest, regardless of background. To that end, HRA is
15 procuring a vendor to continue operating Hart Island
16 as the City's public burial grounds in the next
17 fiscal year as well as a vendor to evaluate the
18 ongoing capacity for burials on the Island. For
19 decades, Hart Island has served as a public cemetery
20 for burials of indigent individuals, or for those
21 decedents whose remains were either unidentified or
22 unclaimed by next of kin. In the Fall of 2019, Mayor
23 de Blasio signed local legislation transferring
24 control of Hart Island from the Department of
25 Corrections to the Parks Department, with HRA

2 formally assuming oversight of the burial operations
3 on Hart Island. As part of this transition, HRA
4 solicited feedback via a public hearing and issued an
5 RFI seeking information about alternative public
6 burial practices, including other possible locations
7 for a public burial ground in New York City. We did
8 not receive any responses outlining a suitable
9 location for alternative burial grounds. Both
10 written and oral responses were overwhelming in favor
11 of continuing to bury decedents on Hart Island. As a
12 result, HRA has issued a procurement to evaluate the
13 ongoing capacity for continued burials on Hart
14 Island, including assessing a range of potential best
15 and alternative uses, and has issued an RFP to
16 identify a vendor that can manage the day-to-day
17 operations on the Island as the City's public burial
18 grounds in the next fiscal year. Due to the
19 competitive bidding process, we cannot discuss the
20 request for proposals beyond what is in the
21 solicitations. The work behind bringing about change
22 and operationalizing important reforms can be
23 challenging, as is the case in Hart Island. However,
24 we remain committed to the transfer of the Island as
25 we continue to provide dignified burial options to

2 those in need, and we look forward to working with
3 the Council as we continue to make progress. We want
4 to thank the Council for your partnership as we
5 continue to work towards an equitable recovery for
6 our city. We look forward to answering questions you
7 may have. Thank you for the opportunity to testify
8 today.

9 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you. I will
10 now turn it over to questions from Chair Levine,
11 followed by Chair Koo. So, members of the
12 Administration, if you stay unmuted, that would be
13 great during this question-and-answer period. Thanks
14 again, and Chair Levine, you can go ahead and start
15 asking questions.

16 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you so much, and I
17 want to acknowledge we've been joined by our
18 colleagues, Council Member Ulrich and Council Member
19 Holden, and I appreciate the testimony of the
20 Administration and I just want to start my view of
21 the big picture here which that for too long Hart
22 Island has been treated as a topic of shame in this
23 city and it's largely been kept out of the public
24 consciousness of New Yorkers despite the fact that it
25 is the final resting place for one million souls,

2 veterans of every war going back to the Civil War,
3 veterans of every major public health crisis up to
4 and including COVID, but of course, along the way,
5 most notably HIV-AIDS and today's it still remains a
6 place which is inaccessible to the public, difficult
7 to access, not impossible, but difficult to access
8 even for those who have loved on there. It's, in
9 many ways, an unsafe place with risk of flooding,
10 with historic structures that are falling down, and
11 it could and should be so much more. It should be a
12 dignified place, open to the public, not just to
13 people who have loved ones buried there, a place
14 which uplifts and celebrates the history, offers
15 reverence to the stories of those who are buried
16 there, including victims of the most recent pandemic,
17 and our work over the last few years has been to move
18 closer to this vision of a dignified final resting
19 place for New Yorkers, and I would go so far to say
20 that I would like to see this be a place that is not
21 only the option of those with no other place to turn,
22 but the kind of place that some New Yorkers feel like
23 would be a good final resting place, and we're very,
24 very far from that goal, but I think partly just
25 changing how we talk about it and being more public

2 about it can begin to change the perception of Hart
3 Island. For any of us who have visited, it is a
4 place of stunning beauty in the middle of the Long
5 Island sound. It's a remarkable place, unique in New
6 York City and in some ways, unique in the world, and
7 I wish more New Yorkers knew of it and were able to
8 experience it firsthand. So, our work today
9 continues on that trajectory, and I have questions
10 later to the big picture, I just have a couple
11 questions related to more immediate concerns about
12 the use of Hart Island during our pandemic year, and
13 the extent to which it was required because of the
14 horrible and painful number of New Yorkers we lost
15 and the strain that put on normal burial system, and
16 this is actually a continuing story as I understand
17 it. So, first, this may be a question for you,
18 Deputy Commission Maniotis. An estimate on the
19 number of additional burials that have taken place
20 since the start of the pandemic beginning in March of
21 2020. I understand that in some cases, it might not
22 be clear rather that additional number of burials was
23 directly attributed to the pandemic, particularly
24 because in the early days, sometimes people weren't
25 diagnosed at time of death and that created other

2 challenges, but I think merely understanding how much
3 above average over, I guess what at this point is a
4 13 or 14 month period, gives us a sense of how many
5 people, either directly or indirectly, due to the
6 pandemic are buried there. Do you have a sense of
7 that number, Commissioner Maniotis?

8 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

9 MANIOTIS: Yes, thank you, Chair Levine, and for the
10 question, I can you that in the calendar year 2020,
11 we laid to rest 2666 souls and in 2021, since
12 January, that number is 504.

13 CHAIR LEVINE: So, in both cases, that is
14 far above the normal pace, correct, and if I'm just
15 ballparking it here, would that represent in totality
16 over the period of the pandemic both from calendar
17 year 2020 and 2021, maybe 1800 burials above normal?
18 Is it possible to estimate that?

19 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

20 MANIOTIS: So, our usual number for each year is
21 approximately 1200. In 2019, we had a little bit
22 less, it was 1135, and that's the usual number
23 annually, so this year, we had, in 2020, we had 1531
24 more and in 2021, we're not yet at that point where
25 we can estimate what that excess is.

2 CHAIR LEVINE: Understood, but it sure
3 does seem like, even for 2021, the pace is a least, a
4 little bit above normal, correct?

5 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

6 MANIOTIS: Absolutely, yes, that's correct.

7 CHAIR LEVINE: And then there's the
8 matter of the significant number of descendants at
9 OCME is still storing in some of the special
10 facilities that you created in response to the
11 crisis, and I'll say that the creation and rapid
12 development of those facilities was itself, an
13 enormous achievement and I know the kind of work it
14 took for your team to make it possible to
15 indefinitely store folks who couldn't be handled by
16 the normal private burial system, but the fact is at
17 a certain point, I presume that's not indefinite and
18 at a certain point, those descendants would be
19 transferred to Hart Island, and could you tell us how
20 many you're still storing and the timeline, if you
21 believe that they will need to transferred to Hart?

22 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

23 MANIOTIS: Yes, so, currently we have approximately
24 750 descendants stored at our long-term storage
25 facility, and you know, this is a temporary facility,

2 and it was established, like you said, specifically
3 to give families that additional time during a very
4 stressed period and for the funeral industry, to give
5 them additional time to make arrangements. We have
6 and will continue to reduce the size of the long-term
7 mortuary operation to meet the need as appropriate so
8 that number is getting smaller, and it will continue
9 to get smaller.

10 CHAIR LEVINE: And at what point, if at
11 point will you begin transferring some of the
12 descendants to Hart Island?

13 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA
14 MANIOTIS: We will begin as soon as, it's coming very
15 shortly, so in the near future, we will begin to
16 notify all the families that we've been working with
17 that we are now going to ramp our operations down
18 slowly, give the time that they need, and we'll keep
19 the operation going as they need it, but we are
20 beginning to ramp those operations down and make the
21 transfer to Hart Island.

22 CHAIR LEVINE: Okay, I think clear
23 communication to the public on that will be really
24 important. Personally, as I mentioned, I don't think
25 that it should be necessarily be treated as such, a

2 shameful matter for someone to be buried on Hart Island
3 although, we understand that the religious traditions
4 for whom Hart Island is not an acceptable final
5 resting place and other, perfectly understandable
6 reasons why a family would choose and prefer for a
7 loved one to be buried elsewhere, so I'm assuming
8 you've done everything possible to connect to the
9 families of those who you currently have in temporary
10 storage and offer them resources if they choose
11 another burial option?

12 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA
13 MANIOTIS: Chair, the OCME, and you know us well, the
14 OCME holds families central to its missions and as
15 Dr. Samson has said, the Chief Medical Examiner has
16 said over and over again, we take care of the dead to help
17 the living, and this is what we continue to do, and
18 yes, we have been working very closely with families
19 and will continue to work with them. They are
20 central to what we do. They are all about what we
21 do, and we have been referring as appropriately when
22 resources are needed to HRA of course, and other non-
23 profit organizations.

24 CHAIR LEVINE: And would you say that
25 most of those still in your custody are people who

2 are, for whom there is no family member who is
3 actively engaged or is it the fact, is it the case
4 that there are family members who are engaged and
5 just don't have the resources or are choosing, for
6 whatever reason, not to pursue private burial?

7 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

8 MANIOTIS: My understanding, and my opinion in this,
9 I'd have to go back and check all the cases, but
10 opinion is that in fact, most of the decedents that
11 we're caring for right now are decedents who, their
12 families have either decided that they want them to
13 go to the final resting place at Hart Island or the
14 families that have no longer are engaging with us
15 regarding their decedent.

16 CHAIR LEVINE: Okay, thank you so much.

17 I don't want to go on too long, but I just want to
18 quickly talk about the future of the island, and Sam,
19 that may be a question for you, since Parks is taking
20 over in a couple of months, and I see Matt Drury
21 (SP?) is on here as well, so, I'm actually not sure.
22 We have multiple great leaders from the Parks
23 Department here so, could the Parks Department share
24 any vision for us for the future of this island,
25 landscaping, storm resiliency, management of

2 structures which are falling down, literally bricks
3 are falling off, a vision for the cemetery which
4 might be in line with the Green Cemetery Movement,
5 could you share with us that vision and those plans?

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:

7 So, yes, of course, thank you for the question, Chair
8 Levine and thank you for the recognition for me and
9 the excellent (inaudible). So, any future planning
10 efforts for the island have first, have to be
11 informed by the HRA Burial Capacity Study. So, the
12 city will revisit the discussion of long-term plans
13 for capital improvements and visitation to the island
14 after this study concludes. In any case, the island
15 will first, primarily remain a functional municipal
16 cemetery, which as you know, is a sacred site for
17 many, many people, many New Yorkers, so any future
18 decisions have got to be respectful of the island's
19 identity as a final resting place for thousands of
20 souls. Now, the structures on the island, which you
21 asked after and what's going to happen with them, I'm
22 happy to share that the mayor's fiscal 22 Executive
23 budget includes more than \$50 million dollar in
24 capital funds for demolition of dangerous structures
25 and other work to help ensure that workers and

2 visitors will be safe as we make changes to this
3 island.

4 CHAIR LEVINE: And just saying, that \$50
5 million is just for Hart Island?

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
7 Yes, yes, for demolition and showing up structures
8 and creating space for future buildings.

9 CHAIR LEVINE: I hadn't heard that news.
10 That's welcomed, that's welcomed news. Sorry, if you
11 have more points to add.

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
13 No, that's the main points there.

14 CHAIR LEVINE: That's great, look, the
15 structures are in bad shape. They're probably all
16 going to have to be demolished. If there was a way
17 to preserve one, the one that's least decayed as a
18 way to preserve history and create a place that can
19 function for use of people visiting, rather it was
20 restrooms, a learning center, connected to some form
21 of memorial to tell a story of the people buried
22 there, do you believe it might be possible to
23 preserve any of the historic structures?

24 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
25 It's a point well taken, Councilman, just to state in

2 my particular role, I couldn't, we could get back to
3 you. I couldn't weigh in on exactly what the state
4 of each structure is or rather any particular one
5 could be preserved, but it is a point well taken and
6 we're happy to circle back.

7 CHAIR LEVINE: And where are we on the
8 FEMA work to prevent future flooding?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
10 Uh, Matt, could I just refer to you on that?

11 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER
12 STROM: DOC, I think our partners at (crosstalk) I
13 think our partners at DOC can speak to the FEMA.

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS:
15 Thank you. So, the FEMA funded Restoration Project
16 concluded in December of 2020.

17 CHAIR LEVINE: And how confident are we
18 now that the island is not vulnerable to flooding?

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: The
20 project was designed following the FEMA guidelines
21 for flooding, so we're confident at this time that it
22 will be sustainable, you know, in the event of future
23 (crosstalk).

24 CHAIR LEVINE: It's only been, sorry,
25 that was December of 2020 that it was concluded?

2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: Yes.

3 CHAIR LEVINE: So, it's only been four or
4 five months, but have there been any instances of
5 disinterment and, I mean, it's a very horrifying
6 thought, but we've had cases of human remains washing
7 up on the City Island and other nearby coastline.
8 Has that happened to your knowledge since that work
9 was completed?

10 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: Not
11 to my knowledge, no.

12 CHAIR LEVINE: Okay, that's good news.
13 So, I'm going to pause there. I will come back for a
14 round two question to HRA on how we support people
15 who need financial assistance for burial, but I don't
16 know if I'm passing it back to you Ann or straight to
17 Chair Koo but thank you to the Administration for
18 this discussion so far.

19 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you, Chair
20 Levine. Chair Koo, if you'd like to ask your
21 questions now, you can go ahead, and also, I'm sorry,
22 Chair Koo, just before we continue, a friendly
23 reminder for other Council Members, if you would like
24 to ask questions after Chair Koo is finished, please
25 use the Zoom raise hand function and I will call on

2 you in the order in which you raise your hand. Thank
3 you, Chair Koo, you can go ahead.

4 CHAIR KOO: Thank you. Yeah, thank you
5 for all the representative from different departments
6 who came to testify today. So, my question is, the
7 first question is related to the Parks transfer
8 process. You know, the Parks Department will take
9 jurisdiction over Hart Island on July 1 of this year,
10 so can you tell us what is the Department's immediate
11 plan for the island at the point of taking
12 jurisdiction? Can you inform us about what to do
13 upon taking over the island?

14 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
15 Yes, Chair Koo, thank you. So, as you know, in
16 accordance with Local Law 2010 formal jurisdiction of
17 Hart Island will be transferred to Department of
18 Parks and Recreation on July the 1st, 2021. So,
19 given that the atriary selection for burial
20 operations is still under way, it is unlikely that
21 parks will have an active mandatory goal on the
22 island at the time of this formal jurisdiction
23 transfer. Depending on the outcome of the selection
24 process for burial operations, Parks may take on
25 responsibility for various duties rather it be

2 landscape management on portions of the island or
3 operation of visitation and tourism of the island.
4 We, of course, are in discussion with the mayor's
5 office and OMB regarding different potential outcomes
6 regarding our active role in the process.

7 CHAIR KOO: So, has the Department or any
8 other agency studied the facilities on the island in
9 order to determine what structures must be demolished
10 or otherwise may be saved or should greater public
11 access occur sometime?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
13 So, as I noted there was really good news that the
14 mayor's Executive budget included, you know, over \$50
15 million dollars in capital funds for demolition of
16 dangerous structures and to assure the safety
17 concerns as well as creating additional space for
18 future burials, but any future planning efforts
19 really do need to be informed by that Burial Capacity
20 Study being led by HRA, so the city will revisit the
21 discussion of long term plans for capital improvement
22 and visitation to the island after this study
23 concludes. In any case, I do want to note that the
24 island will primarily remain a functional municipal
25 cemetery as Chair Levine noted. So, in the future,

2 any decision has got to be respectful of the island
3 as the final resting place for thousands of New
4 Yorkers.

5 CHAIR KOO: So, does the Department know
6 what should be capital projects to move forward?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
8 So, we are going to pursue a study of that, of what
9 capital work needs to be done on the island following
10 this HRA Burial Capacity Study.

11 CHAIR KOO: So, what's the potential
12 cost? Do you have an estimate?

13 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
14 So, you know, as I noted, we do have a theory, about
15 \$2 million dollar in the future Executive budget for
16 demolition of dangerous structures, but you know,
17 which stay, and that's the immediate need here in
18 terms of what our vision of what the capital needs of
19 the island are. Anything beyond that, you know, we
20 would have to conduct a study first, which would come
21 after the HRA Burial Study.

22 CHAIR KOO: So, does this \$50 million
23 dollars cover the public transportation costs for
24 visitors to go to the island?

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:

3 So, the \$50 million dollars is devoted to, its
4 capital funds, right, so it's devoted to just
5 demolition of dangerous structures and safety
6 concerns, so, it's focused on that, on dealing with
7 the state of the island itself as it is rather than
8 transportation services.

9 CHAIR KOO: So, has your department
10 worked with the Transportation Department to develop
11 plans that will be able facilitate the visitation of
12 members of the public or the relatives of the
13 deceased in the future? Have you worked with the
14 Transportation?

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:
16 So, it will be an intra-agency process, so as the
17 details of Hart Island are finalized, we (inaudible)
18 and beyond it in relation to the HRA selection for
19 burial operations proposals. City agencies, includes
20 ours and many others will coordinate on the best
21 approach for developing a Hart Island transportation
22 plan in accordance with Local Law 211.

23 CHAIR KOO: Okay, does the Department
24 have a physical person on the island? Do you guys
25 have a physical person there now?

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:

3 So, we don't have a physical presence there now, but
4 leading up to, you know, we're, of course, have been
5 in conversation with (inaudible) wonderful. The
6 agency is represented on this call, on this council
7 hearing, they have been wonderful in determining a
8 path forward for what the park's presence on the
9 island is going be, but you know, again, I have to
10 note again, it is largely dependent on the outcome of
11 the city's selection process for a vendor to manage
12 public burials.

13 CHAIR KOO: So, you mentioned the Parks
14 will take over formal jurisdiction on July 1st,
15 right?

16 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:

17 Mm-mmm.

18 CHAIR KOO: But practically, not until
19 HRA selects a vendor. So, who will be in charge or
20 responsible for any issues on the island?

21 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SAM BIEDERMAN:

22 So, as it is currently operating, in the meantime,
23 between the HRA now and the HRA selection, DOC will
24 retain solemn responsibility of overseeing burial
25 activity on the island as they've done for decades.

2 CHAIR KOO: Okay. So, my next questions
3 will be related to RFP and RFI so, maybe the other
4 representatives answer me. HRA has been overseeing
5 the RFI and RFP process to determine the future of
6 Hart Island, and RFP will release on January 7,
7 seeking requests for vendor to perform the burials on
8 the island as well as other tasks. The RFP closed on
9 February 16th, so what actions have been taken since
10 the RFP was closed?

11 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

12 STROM: Thank you for the question, Chair Koo. The
13 RFP actually ended up closing on March 5th, and I
14 make note of that because we had a bidder's
15 conference which is part of the process with the new
16 procurement and several of the proposers had
17 important questions that needed to be clarified from
18 the RFP and we wanted to give the proposers enough
19 time to respond to them adequately, so the RFP closed
20 on the March 5th. We launched the Review Committee
21 which is actively in process of reviewing all of the
22 proposed responses and we hope to have an awarding
23 soon. In the interim, while the proposal was opened
24 and meeting up to it over the last year, we've been
25 meeting very often in regards to agencies to make

2 sure that the transition can continue to move
3 forward, so that once a vendor is selected, we're
4 ready to step forward.

5 CHAIR KOO: So, how many responses you
6 received for the RFP?

7 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

8 STROM: Unfortunately, due to procurement rules, I'm
9 not allowed to provide that information or would I be
10 allowed to share it.

11 CHAIR KOO: Okay. So, given the transfer
12 of the island will occur in less than two months,
13 when can we expect more information about the future
14 of the island and the city's public burial process,
15 such as how the burial process will occur and if you
16 be changing at all? We're also curious about the
17 security and maintenance, and the visitation policies
18 for the island?

19 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

20 STROM: Yes, all of those concerns are part of the
21 RFP process, and the hope is that response to the
22 proposal addresses all those. In the RFP, we asked
23 several questions. We asked about how our potential
24 vendor would look at a preburial process, how they
25 were do interments, will they continue the practice

2 of DOC, do they have an alternate means of wanting to
3 do interments, how they would manage exhumations,
4 what they would do in case of another emergency like
5 the one we just went through. We also asked the
6 proposers to look at an outline of how they would
7 manage landscaping and burial ground maintenance as
8 well as security on the island and overall cemetery
9 administration functions. So, I think quite a bit of
10 information will come out once these proposals are
11 reviewed. We are confident that we will be able to
12 find a good vendor and in the interim, DOC, you know,
13 as DOC stated in their testimony, are no longer using
14 incarcerated individuals to do the burial process,
15 but have hired Civil Service staff who are doing an
16 excellent job in maintaining the island, so I feel
17 very confident in saying that there will be no gap in
18 services, both from maintaining the island and as
19 well as continuing the operations until we can make
20 sure that we have a good and appropriate vendor in
21 place.

22 CHAIR KOO: So, how are you dealing with
23 security? Are we going to use NYPD for the security
24 on the island?

2 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

3 STROM: That's still to be determined. It really is
4 dependent on how the awardee proposes to manage
5 security. I think security needs will change and
6 have changed since we are no longer using
7 incarcerated individual on the island, but that's to
8 say that we will be in conversation with NYPD to make
9 sure that whatever the awardee puts forward is an
10 adequate amount of security for the island.

11 CHAIR KOO: So, can you tell us something
12 about the future visitation policy of the island?

13 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

14 STROM: The future and transportation policy is quite
15 dependent on what comes out of the operation office
16 and also the Capacity Study solicitation that we're
17 engaging on as well. We are in constant conversation
18 with DOT and their transportation plan, they're
19 continuing to work on it. It's still yet to be
20 determine if the vendor will be responsible for
21 visitation if Parks Department will be and that will
22 come out of when we award a vendor.

23 CHAIR KOO: I heard administration was
24 starting to resume visitation on May 15th to the
25 island, so can you give us some details on that?

2 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

3 STROM: Sure, I'll let my partners at DOC respond to
4 you what the visitation will look like starting in
5 mid-May.

6 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS:

7 Sure, thank you. So, we will resume visitation on a
8 limited basis starting May 15th. It will consist of
9 two trips, one at 9:00 a.m. and one at 12:00 p.m.,
10 and to facilitate social distancing and appropriate
11 COVID-19 measures, we going to have 10 visitors per
12 trip so they can be safely distanced on the bus that
13 travels over to the island so in normal
14 circumstances, you can be on the ferry boat either in
15 the cabin or on the deck, but to support social
16 distancing in case of increment weather, we're going
17 to have the visitors on the boat going over and
18 returning back to the bus.

19 CHAIR KOO: Where do they take boat?
20 Where?

21 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: I'M
22 SORRY.

23 CHAIR KOO: Where did they take the boat?
24 You said the bus?

25

2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: Yes,
3 they will board at the dock, the DOT dock. They will
4 board a bus.

5 CHAIR KOO: Where is this dock, DOT,
6 Queens or what?

7 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: To
8 the island.

9 CHAIR KOO: To the island, okay.

10 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: They
11 will board a bus that's on that dock, that bus will
12 board onto the ferry boat that carries them over to
13 Hart Island, then they will proceed to the respective
14 burial locations are for their intended visit and
15 they will reboard that bus which will then get back
16 onto the ferry boat and travel back to the City
17 Island dock that's operated by DOT for a return back.

18 CHAIR KOO: How do the visitors make
19 reservations? How do they call in reservations?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS:
21 We'll still be doing that online through our office
22 of constituent services.

23 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: So,
24 Council Member, that actually will remain unchanged
25 from the way that visitors and the department

2 operated prior to the pandemic. All visitors on our
3 website have the opportunity to, I believe there's a
4 web form and also a phone number and an email
5 address. So, there are many opportunities for a
6 visitor to get into contact with the department and
7 let us know that they'd like to reserve a spot to
8 come to Hart Island that day.

9 CHAIR KOO: Okay, I have just one more
10 question. The question is about future capacity of
11 the island. There's a separate RFP on the capacity
12 of the island for future burials, what part of the
13 process has HRA deemed for this RFP? How many
14 responses did you get?

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Thank
16 you for the question. We're actually quite excited
17 about the capacity study. We are in the final stages
18 of awarding the capacity study. We have an
19 interagency steering committee that has members of,
20 forgive if I don't get everyone, DOC, DOT, Parts
21 Department, DVC, DOV, HRA; I think that's everyone.
22 Oh, CME, of course. So, it's a very diverse group to
23 make sure that all aspects of the city's interests
24 are address by the vendor. We hope that they vendor
25 will begin their work over the summer and that will

2 entail looking at the whole entire island,
3 understanding which parts we could increase burials
4 on, which parts have been underutilized, now that the
5 shoreline is restored, how close to the shore we can
6 go, since we've already made major steps in taking
7 down some of the unsafe, or remove some of the unsafe
8 buildings, they'll be looking at what's the
9 possibility underneath the buildings. They're going
10 to look at environmental studies to see what the
11 environmental impact is. So, at the end of the study
12 which will take approximately a year, they will offer
13 us a report that talks through things like where a
14 visitor center could be, what could be the possible
15 storage on the island to help relieve some of the
16 burden of OCME, should another emergency happen. So,
17 there's archeologists, there's architects as part of
18 the capacity study. It's pretty robust, and I think
19 will be a very critical tool and we're excited about
20 it.

21 CHAIR KOO: So, when do we expect this
22 RFP to finish, to complete?

23 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY:
24 Likely, we should have a final report by spring of
25 22.

2 CHAIR KOO: Okay, thank you. So, I'm
3 going to turn it back to Chair Levine and other
4 Councils Members who have questions.

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Thank
6 you, Chair Koo.

7 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you, Chair Koo.
8 Yes, I see have, I'll let you ask for questions from
9 other colleagues, please.

10 MODERATE ANN BALKIN: Yes, thanks Chairs
11 Koo and Levine. So, as I mentioned before, I'm going
12 to now call on Council Member in the order they've
13 used the Zoom raise hand function. If you would like
14 to ask a question, and you've not yet used the Zoom
15 raise hand function, please do so now. Council
16 Members, please keep your questions to five minutes.
17 The Sergeant at Arms will keep a timer and will let
18 you know when your time is up. You should begin once
19 I have called on you and the Sergeant has announced
20 that you may begin. So, first we will hear from
21 Council Member Gjonaj, followed by Council Member
22 Moya, and then Council Member Barron. So, Council
23 Member Gjonaj, we will cue you first.

24 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

2 CM GJONAJ: Thank you, thank you, Chair
3 Levine and Chair Koo for this very important hearing.
4 I have to tell you that this has been a very
5 emotional and painful hearing for me as I'm sure, as
6 for many of you, as we talk about the remains of our
7 deceased and loved ones and how they're handled. I
8 have so many questions, I'm sure I'm going to have to
9 follow up with the various agencies afterwards, but
10 something has come to mind. Are we at capacity now?
11 Do we have room now for additional burials? Can
12 anyone answer that question?

13 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: Yes,
14 we have capacity now.

15 CM GJONAJ: Great. I hear things of a
16 bus that has to now be place on this ferry to go onto
17 the island. The island was within my District. I
18 know the island very well. I don't understand this
19 new protocol of having to put people into a bus, and
20 maybe you can elaborate a little bit more on this?

21 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: Sure,
22 Council Member. So, this is just to assure social
23 distancing. I want to be clear that, and Deputy
24 Commissioner, please correct me if I'm wrong, this is
25 not going to be a new bus going through your

2 District. It's our bus that's already on City
3 Island.

4 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: Yes.

5 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: It will
6 be brought back and forth over the ferry. I'm sorry,
7 not to the island, I apologize. Already on Hart
8 Island, it will be brought back and forth over the
9 ferry. The reality is most, I don't know if you've
10 been ferry before to Hart Island, but for the most
11 part, it's outdoors, which is great for social
12 distancing, but in increment weather, the only space
13 that would be available to people are those little
14 cabins on the side of the ferry, and so we don't
15 want, you know, the one or two days a month that
16 people have the opportunity to go to Hart Island to
17 not be able to actually visit the island because they
18 can't actually social distance in those little
19 cabins, and so our solution is to put our bus on the
20 ferry. They'll get on the Hart Island dock. This is
21 something we've done previously ... (crosstalk).

22 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: I
23 personally, I personally traveled over to the island
24 in that matter.

2 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: Yeah, so
3 it's not new or unheard of, it's just the protocol
4 that we're going to use going forward.

5 CM GJONAJ: So, this is going to be used
6 during increment weather only?

7 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: No, it's
8 going to be our protocol, and I wrong?

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER PATRICIA LYONS: No,
10 this is our first return to visitation for this
11 month. So, this is the path we've chosen for this
12 month, and will continue to re-evaluate the reopening
13 plans for the city and state to proceed as to, you
14 know, what is the best possible method for moving
15 forward with visitation, but under the current
16 conditions, this is what we thought was the most
17 reasonable thing to do as our first return to visits.

18 CM GJONAJ: I'm just going to add my
19 input here. If there's increment weather, I could
20 understand a bus versus confined space. If it's not
21 increment weather, the traditional way of visiting
22 Hart Island which was in an open-air deck would be
23 the safest means. There's no reason for that extra
24 step. You actually confine and contra to COVID
25 concerns, you're actually putting them in a confined

2 space, but I'll leave that to your better judgement.
3 I don't think there's a need for a bus unless there's
4 increment weather. So, snow, rain, or extreme cold
5 conditions, I could understand. Aside from that, I
6 think common sense would dictate there's no need for
7 a bus, but I'll leave that to your better judgement.
8 The steering committee, Ms. Strom, that you refer to,
9 I heard no mention of community input. Harts Island
10 is a very sensitive issue for the neighboring
11 residents, the communities that have been impacted by
12 it. I have not heard of any means by which
13 communities can be part of these steering committees
14 so that their concerns can be heard, rather it be the
15 method of visitation or buses or traffic or other
16 security concerns, so I would encourage you to please
17 allocate space on these steering committees that will
18 help shape better RFP and to get ahead of it versus
19 behind it. Go ahead and I'm sorry, and I know time
20 is going to run out and I have a lot of questions.
21 So, maybe if you could answer that, Ms. Strom, after
22 I ask my next few questions. Whose making the
23 determination now of applications that are approved
24 for those that are seeking public burial? That's
25 number one, number two, I believe the number was 3589

2 applications, and only 357 were approved. Who is
3 denying them and on what basis for, I believe it was,
4 missing documentation or paperwork? We're talking
5 about the most sacred of things that we can do for
6 our loved one is a proper burial, why are we still
7 having 750 ... (crosstalk).

8 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time expired.

9 CM GJONAJ: In storage, and the word
10 storage, when we think of deceased is a horrible word
11 to use. Why do we have these temporary storage
12 facilities as they are referred to, if there's
13 capacity and for those families that have already
14 expressed the willingness to have their loved buried
15 in a public burial on Hart Island, why are delaying
16 that any longer than we have to? Who has made that
17 decision, or will make that decision and why is there
18 a hold up in that regard? I have so many more
19 questions and the time ran out on me, and I know that
20 many of the people that are participating on this
21 hearing are local residents and they have slew of
22 questions, but I'm really concerned, are we doing
23 what we're accountable for as we bury our loved ones,
24 native New Yorkers and people that choose to be
25 buried in public cemeteries such as Hart Island, and

2 so far this has been very painful for me and I'm sure
3 it's going to be painful for the many more that are
4 going to testify. So, if someone could answer those
5 questions.

6 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

7 STROM: Sure, Council Member. Thank you for the
8 questions and you know, we echo that the
9 responsibility of laying New Yorkers to rest is a
10 solemn one, but I think all of the city agencies that
11 are represented today take to heart and believe, and
12 we feel humble and honored that we are able to be
13 part of this process, and we take it seriously. In
14 terms of, I pulled out three questions from your
15 questions, and I'll answer the first one. Regarding
16 the steering committee and the capacity study, so,
17 it's 2019. We did have an open public hearing and we
18 did have an RFI process that was open to anyone to
19 respond and looking for questions about how the
20 future of Hart Island should look if there are any
21 other public burial grounds that people have
22 suggestions for, if there were different processes,
23 that we should be eliciting. We took all that
24 information and that is what went into book the
25 vendor, the operations RFP that HR released as well

2 as the capacity study which are two separate vendors
3 that will be doing this work. So, we did solicit and
4 receive good feedback from the community, and we've
5 put it into, it's what helped us write the RFP and
6 the solicitation. So, to that effect, I believe that
7 we have really taken into account, not only what this
8 means for all New Yorkers, what it means, you know,
9 for City Island representative and residents, and
10 then I will let my colleague, Natasha Godby talk
11 through the denial rates.

12 CM GJONAJ: Thank you, Ms. Strom, I did
13 have one question more that I forgot to bring up. Do
14 we have any information on how many people applied
15 over the course of the last year or so to visit Hart
16 Island? What was the number and how were they
17 denied? What was the method of communication when
18 they were able to go on a website, request a
19 visitation, what was the number of visitation
20 requests and what was the follow up with those
21 families trying to visit their loved ones, including
22 those recently deceased of 2660 that were buried
23 alone in the year 2020?

24 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

25 STROM: I'm writing down all your questions, sort of

2 backing for our team. So, Natasha, if you could talk
3 through the denial rate for applications for burial
4 assistance first.

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Okay,
6 so the Office of Burial Services receives and
7 processes the applications, that office and HRA, and
8 just to clarify, the 3589 number was last reported
9 back on January 28, 2021, and that covered the full
10 year of 2020 and the 28 days in January of 2021, so
11 the actual numbers for the year 2020 is 3549
12 applications received and of that number, 476 were
13 approved. So, the reason behind the high denial
14 rate, the highest denial is based upon the
15 applications not being completed completely meaning
16 that the applicant has not submitted the remaining
17 paperwork or documentation and of the 2020 numbers,
18 roughly 63% of those applications were denied because
19 of that, and the percentage includes applicants who
20 decided not to continue with their application for
21 the burial allowance. We routinely reach out to
22 applicants to obtain their documentation to further
23 explain the program guideline and how to obtain
24 supporting documentation. Applicants are not
25 required to submit new applications to address

2 missing documents; however, we find that once an
3 applicant has a fuller understanding of the public
4 assistance program eligibility requirements, they
5 often do not follow up with their application and
6 since the income and asset eligibility criteria are
7 set by the state, the related documentation
8 requirements are necessary to establish eligibility
9 for the program as it's geared toward low-income
10 decedents.

11 CM GJONAJ: Ms. Godby, thank you for that
12 explanation. I know it's a very complicated
13 question, and you answered the best you can, but you
14 said 63% were denied based on the application being
15 incomplete, for lack of follow up documents.

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Yes.

17 CM GJONAJ: Aside from income
18 verification where the family may not have access to
19 that information, we're actually denying a family
20 member's burial due to no fault of their own during
21 COVID where perhaps they could not obtain this
22 information.

23 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: So,
24 the ... (crosstalk).

2 CHAIR LEVINE: Sorry, I just want to
3 interrupt, Commissioner. After this Council Member,
4 we're going to ask that you hold your questions to a
5 second round, if that's okay.

6 CM GJONAJ: I apologize in advance,
7 Chair.

8 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you.

9 CM GJONAJ: Thank you, Chair.

10 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

11 STROM: Natasha, is there anything you wanted to add
12 OR should we go onto the next?

13 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: I was
14 just going to say that the eligibility criteria does
15 include getting additional documentation and that we
16 routine extend the timeframe 60 days, 30 days, even
17 if a case is closed, it can be reopened upon
18 submission of a request, and we also give a lot of
19 time to get the additional documentation. We're
20 flexible.

21 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

22 STROM: Thank you so much, and then Dina, if you
23 wanted to talk through the Council Member's question
24 around storage. Yes, you mentioned it before, but

2 how long are you planning to hold the emergency
3 storage units?

4 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

5 MANIOTIS: So, we will continue to work with families.
6 As soon as the family tells us that they would like
7 their loved one to be transferred to Hart Island for
8 burial, we do that very quickly or as soon as the
9 family tells us what their final disposition decision
10 is, then we work with them, and if it's to do a
11 private burial, a funding issue involved, we then
12 work with them and HRA and other non-profits to make
13 sure that they have access to the resources that they
14 need. So, there's no delay from the OCME on
15 transferring to Hart Island once the decision is made
16 by the family. We can move very quickly on that.

17 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

18 STROM: All right, thank you, and then finally, DOC,
19 can you talk through the process over the last year
20 for request for visitation?

21 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF DANA WAX: Sure, so
22 as has been noted, visitation has been paused since
23 March of 2020. In accordance, we put a notice up on
24 our website and we also took down our form so that
25 there could be no confusion so that people wouldn't

2 be able to request a visit when the visit couldn't
3 actually happen. I understand that there have been a
4 very limited number of inquiries. There were like
5 one or two a month for visitation and if somebody did
6 inquire with us, their email was responded to and
7 people were told we did not have visitation currently
8 or if they called the Hart Island hotline, they were
9 told the same thing.

10 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

11 STROM: All right, thank you. I think that ...

12 (crosstalk).

13 CHAIR LEVINE: Yes, let's move on to
14 Council Member Barron, I believe is next, is that
15 right?

16 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Chair Levine, we
17 actually have ... (crosstalk).

18 CHAIR LEVINE: Oh, forgive me. Council
19 Member Moya is next.

20 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Yes.

21 CHAIR LEVINE: Forgive me. No problem.
22 (Crosstalk). Thank you for your patience, Council
23 Member Moya.

24 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: You may begin
25 whenever the Sergeant cues you.

2 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

3 CM MOYA: Thank you, thank you to both
4 Chair Koo and Chair Levine for really bringing this
5 very important hearing to light. I just to talk
6 about the burial fund that deal specifically with the
7 undocumented community. I have the epicenter of the
8 pandemic in Corona and in East Delmhorst, area codes
9 11368, 11369. You know, I called for this from the
10 very beginning along with myself and Speaker Johnson
11 to ask why HRA would not allow undocumented
12 immigrants to receive assistance to bury their loved
13 ones given we had a large number of undocumented
14 immigrants that were dying due to COVID. They
15 couldn't send the body back home to their native
16 countries because of the COVID restrictions. Now
17 that we injected some type of funding at that time
18 was about (inaudible) between private and public
19 partnerships there. Now that we're seeing there's
20 been an increase for the burial assistance in the
21 funds that are coming from the federal government,
22 what updates to the communication process has the
23 Office of the Burial Services made throughout the
24 pandemic when working with H&H and other hospitals to
25 inform New Yorkers of their options and assistance

2 resources, and then I have one more question and
3 that's it?

4 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

5 STROM: Thank you, Council Member Moya. I'll let my
6 colleague, Natasha Godby talk through both, the work
7 that we're doing for the new FEMA assistance as well
8 as for undocumented New Yorkers.

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Okay,
10 so with regard to communication and outreach, we have
11 updated our website and many HRA, DSS promotional
12 materials over time. We've provided FAQs, the
13 application, and additional information on our
14 website as well as to 3-1-1. As an agency, we value
15 our community partners and work proactively to inform
16 and update them on our programming. HRA's DSS's lead
17 on such communication and works with our CBO
18 partners. They send out regular communications on
19 HRA services including the burial program on a weekly
20 basis. Additionally, HRA has created training
21 programs and outreach materials that we send out to
22 all of our sister agencies. In the very beginning,
23 our program had worked closely with the Mayor's
24 Office of Immigrant Affairs where the IDNYC staff had
25 worked closely with the Office of Burial Services to

2 make sure that the undocumented communities could
3 apply for these services. So, that office, MOYA,
4 continues to do the outreach locally. They are
5 engaging CBOs that are going to work to continue to
6 provide the application and the program to
7 undocumented communities.

8 CM MOYA: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to
9 interrupt. So, is that, are you saying that MOYA,
10 other MOYA is the agency responsible for getting the
11 information out to the public?

12 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Well,
13 it's still at Office of Burial Services, but we
14 partnered with MOYA from the very beginning of the
15 pandemic, and they're also continuing to outreach as
16 well, through their CBOs as well.

17 CM MOYA: Is there a list of those CBOs
18 in which they are partnering up with that is made
19 available to the public?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: What
21 I have is, it's says, I'm sorry, I just got to find
22 it, so the program benefited many New Yorkers. It
23 looks like the CBOs identify was NYCE, African
24 Communities Together and Make the Road New York and
25 Bronx Works.

2 CM MOYA: Okay, and I'm just going to
3 quickly, I'll go back to the other questions. I just
4 want to know; did they give input back to MOYA or to
5 HRA of how many people actually came in through their
6 CBOs applying for the burial fund? Is there any data
7 that comes in from these organizations that you just
8 mentioned?

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: No,
10 not to my knowledge at this point in time, but we can
11 take it back and ask.

12 CM MOYA: Okay, cause I'd like to know
13 how we're tracking that then, right, because if the
14 CBO's responsible for the intake in our community,
15 how are we finding out rather or not they're having
16 success in districts like mine which was the
17 epicenter of this where there's a great need for
18 that, and how are we being effective in using these
19 organizations, which I'm sure they're all great
20 organizations, but I'd like to know how we can get
21 that information back because that's really
22 important. My last question, I'm sorry ...

23 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time expired.

24 CM MOYA: Of the 2334 adults estimated to
25 have been buried in 2020, is there an indication of

2 those identified by zip code and neighborhood where
3 they resided in and in addition to the location where
4 they died?

5 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

6 MANIOTIS: Nicole, would you like me to respond?

7 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER

8 STROM: Yes, Dina, thanks, sorry, I wasn't sure if it
9 should be you or DOC. Please go ahead, thank you.

10 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

11 MANIOTIS: Yes, for all statistic regarding burials
12 at Hart Island, demographic statistic report which
13 would include the areas and zip codes, our Department
14 of Health is the agency that manages and is in, all
15 statistics are under their offices, and they also
16 have, you know, the expertise in handling
17 confidential health-related information
18 appropriately. So, all demographic and statistical
19 information regarding Hart Island will be at the
20 Department of Health.

21 CM MOYA: Thank you, and can we get those
22 statistics? Can we get the breakdown by zip code?

23 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

24 MANIOTIS: I think if you would, Council Member, make
25 a request as part of this and just ask the question

2 on specifically what you want, I'm sure that DOH
3 would respond appropriately.

4 CM MOYA: Okay, and then I just want to
5 make sure that I get the CBOs that had those numbers
6 of applications that came in. Thank you, thank you
7 both Chairs and thank you to my colleagues for
8 extending the time, thank you.

9 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you, Council Member,
10 and I think Council Member Barron, we would like to
11 hear from you now.

12 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

13 CM BARRON: Thank you very much. I want
14 to thank the chairs for having this hearing and thank
15 the panel for coming and sharing their information
16 with us. My questions are on the same as my two
17 colleagues who posed questions before me. So, there
18 were 3500 or so, persons who applied and I heard a
19 response that some were missing information, and some
20 withdrew the request which resulted, I think, how
21 many applications being processed?

22 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: So,
23 for 2020, sorry, 476 applications were approved, 2949
24 were deemed ineligible, 3425 out of the 3549 were
25 processed ... (crosstalk).

2 CM BARRON: For those that were deem
3 ineligible, do we have this aggregated data as to why
4 they were deemed ineligible? Was it because it was
5 still continuing to have missing information or was
6 it because they withdrew their application for
7 whatever reason?

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: The
9 denial rates, it is, it is aggregated by reason. So,
10 for those who withdrew their application, 1.7%, that
11 is the number, meaning that 50 of those applications
12 were withdrawn out of the 3549. For those ...
13 (crosstalk).

14 CM BARRON: That's a small number of
15 people who withdrew. For those that were still
16 deemed to be ineligible, do we have the information
17 as to rather it was because they exceeded what the
18 eligibility requirement was or because they still had
19 missing information? I'm trying to get the point, is
20 if there are people who can benefit from having
21 someone hold their hand and walk them through getting
22 the information, can we get a larger number of people
23 deemed to be eligible?

24 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Yes,
25 so the caseworkers do walk the clients through

2 obtaining the documentation and in most instances,
3 they're asked for the bank statement for the
4 decedent, if there's an insurance policy, that is
5 requested, if there's any additional information such
6 as receipt of SSI benefits or Social Security Death
7 Benefit; all of these documents are asked for and we
8 do understand that it takes time to engage with
9 another agency to get this information to be provided
10 back to HRA. So, the caseworkers do explain that and
11 again, we do extend the time to get this
12 documentation, you know, beyond the 60 days. We add
13 another 30 days to get this information, but just so
14 know ... (crosstalk).

15 CM BARRON: So, it's a total of 90 days
16 that is given to those who apply. Is that the cut
17 off, 90 days?

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: The
19 cut off is 60 days from the time that the letter is
20 sent out stating exactly what needs to be submitted.
21 Then thereafter, an extension could be requested
22 multiple times and for each extension, it's 30 days.

23 CM BARRON: Oh, so it might extend beyond
24 that 90 days?

2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Yes,
3 yes.

4 CM BARRON: Okay.

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: And
6 even if there's no engagement or communication, if we
7 don't hear from the applicant and the case closes,
8 they can come back and say would you please reopen my
9 case ... (crosstalk).

10 CM BARRON: Oh.

11 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY:
12 Because I now have the documentation.

13 CM BARRON: Okay, great. Now, we're
14 talking about the income and eligibility of the
15 deceased person?

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY:
17 Correct. It's the decedent's ... (crosstalk).

18 CM BARRON: The income assets of the
19 deceased person?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY:
21 Correct, it's the decedent and if they have a legally
22 responsible relative, spouse, or if they are the
23 parent of a minor who is deceased, they too have to
24 be income ineligible.

2 CM BARRON: Okay, okay. Okay, thank you,
3 and then so the next question is how long do you
4 maintain custody of the decedents until a final
5 determination is made?

6 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER
7 STROM: Just to clarify, do you mean before they
8 would go to Hart Island or?

9 CM BARRON: Yes, yes.

10 EIS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NICOLE DONIGER
11 STROM: Do you know that, Dina? Can you walk her
12 through that process?

13 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA
14 MANIOTIS: Yes. So, if the family has not yet made a
15 decision, the decedent will remain with the OCME
16 while we work with the families to make that decision
17 rather they would like the loved one to be buried at
18 Hart Island or another final resting place.

19 CM BARRON: I asked that question because
20 there was a constituent that we were told received
21 information that she had to hurry up and make her
22 decision because if she didn't make her decision with
23 X number of days, the remains would be transported to
24 Hart Island, and she was trying to get funds together

2 and get the resources to be able to have a private
3 burial.

4 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time expired.

5 CM BARRON: Mr. Chair, if I could have a
6 few more minutes, another minute? Is silence a
7 consent, agreement? So, that question is, is there a
8 time limit ... (crosstalk).

9 CHAIR KOO: Go ahead, yeah.

10 CM BARRON: Thank you, thank you Mr.
11 Chair. So, is there a cut off time by which a person
12 must have made a decision? They're trying to get
13 arrangements for a private.

14 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

15 MANIOTIS: Right, so here's our policy or our process
16 with families. Families, like I said earlier are
17 central and we try to work with the family and
18 accommodate them as well as we possibly can. If the
19 family needs to make, there's a certain amount of
20 time that they think about the process, and if they
21 need more time, they just ask for more time, and we
22 give them more time. We certainly are not going to
23 send anyone to Hart Island, loved one, if the family
24 is saying please hold because I need to make
25 arrangements. We will just hold.

2 CM BARRON: Thank you, and one last
3 question if I may, Mr. Chair, what is the process for
4 a family that wants to have the remains disinterred
5 and interred someplace else?

6 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

7 MANIOTIS: There is no cost for the disinterment to
8 occur at Hart Island, so the family would go to a
9 funeral director and say to the funeral director, I'd
10 like to have my loved one's remains disinterred. I
11 believe DOC gets that request from the funeral
12 director. The city does not charge anything for the
13 disinterment. The funeral director then takes the
14 remains, conducts the (inaudible).

15 CM BARRON: Okay. Thank you very much
16 and thank you Mr. Chairs for indulging me the little
17 extra time. Thank you.

18 CHAIR KOO: Thank you.

19 CM BARRON: Thank you.

20 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you, Council
21 Members, thank you Council Member Barron. Just as a
22 final reminder, if there are any Council Members who
23 are on who have any questions that have not yet used
24 the Zoom raise hand function, please do so now.
25 Seeing none, I will now turn it back to our Chairs to

2 see if they have any additional questions that they
3 would like to ask.

4 CHAIR KOO: Chair Levine?

5 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: So, either Chair
6 Koo or Chair Levine if you have any additional
7 questions for the Administration.

8 CHAIR KOO: Yeah, I'm here, yeah. So, my
9 question is like, if the deceased's family or next of
10 kin person wants to bury the deceased on Hart
11 Island, can they use the money to bury in particular
12 place they choose?

13 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

14 MANIOTIS: Is that question directed to me, Chair
15 Koo?

16 CHAIR KOO: Yes.

17 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

18 MANIOTIS: So, there is no cost to a family to
19 transfer their loved ones to Hart Island for burial.
20 That is completely without a cost to the family.
21 Private burials have a cost associated and that's
22 when I would turn it over to HRA for their burial
23 office. That part would be the family would work
24 with the burial office.

25 CHAIR KOO: I see.

2 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

3 MANIOTIS: For burial.

4 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Yes,
5 that is correct.

6 CHAIR KOO: So, what happens if the
7 deceased is undocumented? Do they still get the
8 assistance?

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: Yes.
10 Yes, the Office of Burial Services is continuing to
11 accept applications for those who are undocumented,
12 and again, as I said earlier, we worked very closely
13 with IDNYC at the beginning of the pandemic to do
14 outreach and we still are, you know, able to receive
15 applications because the mayor's funding is still
16 available for the undocumented applicants.

17 CHAIR KOO: Okay, so, I think, in lieu of
18 time, I've finished my questions. Any other members
19 want to ask additional questions? Council Member
20 Gjonaj? Are you still there? I'm done with my
21 questions. Is Council Member Levine there?

22 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thanks, Chair Koo.
23 If you are finished with your questions, it seems
24 like we have wrapped up questions for the
25 Administration. I'll just do one last call for, oh,

2 I see, I was just going to do a last call for hands
3 for other Council Members to raise their hands, since
4 Council Member Koo has asked for a second round, if
5 seems as if Council Member Gjonaj, if you have
6 additional questions, you can proceed.

7 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

8 CM GJONAJ: Thank you. Just really
9 quickly, thank you Chairman Koo for allowing me to go
10 for a second round. I'm still just disturbed by the
11 number of denials. The 3000 that were denied based
12 on documentation or be able to fill out an
13 application. Council Member Moya brought up a great
14 point. It seems like the agencies that are involved
15 in the approving or disapproving these applications
16 are first taking a position of denial, and we have
17 capacity, and no one in their right mind, I would
18 imagine, that has the financial resources to bury a
19 loved one in a private cemetery would opt not to.
20 Those 3000 requests, I would imagine, did so because
21 of financial hardship. They couldn't afford a
22 private burial, and it's disturbing and heartbreaking
23 to me to find that they were denied which I would
24 imagine, through no fault of their own, were not able
25 to get the documents that are needed. If you're

2 asking for financial information, as a family member,
3 I'm not privy to that. The only people that can
4 provide that is the IRS. IRS was shut down. They
5 were not responding to requests for information, nor
6 would they be willing to give the information so
7 readily to anyone without due diligence. So, it
8 sounds like this was a more of a, let's figure out
9 how to deny the request than actually approve their
10 request on something so sensitive, and I'm hoping you
11 can answer me, Ms. Godby, (inaudible) and there are
12 those that are on this hearing are shaking heads
13 right now, saying this is unimaginable.

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NATASHA GODBY: So,
15 just to clarify. So, of the 2949 applications that
16 were ineligible, not in every case has it been that
17 the burial has not taken place. In a lot of these
18 situations, these are reimbursement requests meaning
19 that the burial has taken place and at a private
20 cemetery, their asking to be reimbursed for the
21 funding that was spent. Nonetheless, the reason for
22 the ineligibility is because the program is geared
23 towards indigent decedents, indigent legally
24 responsible relatives, so the bar for the program,
25 you know, is quite high only because of the state's

2 guideline that is a public assistance program.
3 Additionally, now with the FEMA benefit, you know,
4 that expands the amount of, you know, reimbursement
5 because that cost, the reimburse there is like \$9000,
6 and once again, you know, we are reaching out to all
7 of the applicants, even those who were approved by
8 HRA to receive a benefit to also receive a letter
9 from us encouraging them also go and seek the FEME
10 benefits so that they can also to get reimbursement.

11 CM GJONAJ: My last question is has the
12 website updated providing information that beginning
13 in May, visitation will begin again, please make
14 requests. Has that been updated as of today?

15 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

16 MANIOTIS: Yes, our website has been updated.

17 CM GJONAJ: All right, so anyone can make
18 a request for visitation and then it's first come,
19 first serve?

20 EXECUTIVE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER DINA

21 MANIOTIS: That's correct.

22 CM GJONAJ: Thank you so much. Thank
23 you, Chair for those additional questions.

24 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you Council
25 Member Gjonaj. So, seeing no other hands raised, we

2 will now conclude the Administration testimony. So,
3 thanks again to all members of the Administration.
4 We're now going to turn to the public testimony. I'd
5 like to remind everyone that we will be calling
6 individuals one-by-one to testify. Each panelist
7 will be given three minutes to speak. For panelist,
8 after I call your name, a member of our staff will
9 unmute you. There may be a few seconds of delay
10 before you are unmuted and so we thank you in advance
11 for your patience. Please wait a brief moment for
12 the Sergeant at Arms to announce that you may begin
13 before starting your testimony. Council Members who
14 have questions for a particular panelist, should use
15 the Zoom raise hand function and I will call on you
16 after the entire panel has completed their testimony
17 in the order in which you raised you raised your
18 hand. So, now, I'm going to invite the first public
19 panel to testify. We will start with Commissioner
20 Edwina Frances Martin, followed by Amy Koplow,
21 followed by James Donofrio. So, Commissioner Martin,
22 you may begin once the Sergeant cues you.

23 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

24 COMMISSIONER EDWINA FRANCES MARTIN:

25 Thank you and good afternoon. My name is Edwina

2 Frances Martin, and I am the Commissioner and Public
3 Administrator of Richmond County. I wish to thank
4 Chairs Levine and Koo for holding the hearing today
5 and thank you for inviting me to testify regarding
6 the future of Hart Island and New York City's public
7 burial process and burial assistance program. The
8 Office of the Richmond County Public Administrator is
9 responsible for the administration of these states of
10 persons that have left no will and where there are no
11 qualified persons to administer the decedent's
12 estate. We are a first responder city agency that
13 serves essential public functions. Last year, we
14 were on the front lines in helping New York City
15 respond to the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic. We
16 worked closely of the Office of the New York City
17 Medical Examiner to research unclaimed decedents to
18 help locate family members or arrange for burial on
19 Staten Island where that was not possible. We
20 assisted property owners in gaining access to
21 domiciles that were sealed due to death occurring in
22 the home, enabling them to retrieve items for
23 burials, wills and other essential documents and to
24 secure the property. We worked closely with nursing
25 homes and long-term care facilities to arrange the

2 burials of unclaimed decedents and as always, we
3 protected the decedent's property from waste, lost,
4 or theft, and located persons entitled to inherit
5 from the estates. We're also a revenue generating
6 agency for the city, generating approximately 1.4
7 million for the city from fees since 2014. In 2020,
8 banks in large part to member item funding from
9 Councilwoman Debbie Rose as well as donated services
10 from Staten Island funeral homes, we arranged for the
11 dignified burials of 64 Staten Island residents as
12 well as nine still-born infants, thus preventing the
13 fate of their being buried on Hart Island. We work
14 closely with funeral directors, area hospitals, the
15 medical examiner, as well as organizations and
16 cemeteries that do not charge for plots for the
17 burial of indigent persons and still born infants on
18 non-titled land, and for veteran decedents, we work
19 with the mayor's Office of Veteran Services to
20 provide low or no-cost burials. While caskets and
21 some services are donated, there are many costs
22 incurred for a burial program. We are not able to
23 use our city budget funds for burials other than the
24 member item, and we're not reimbursed for costs by
25 the Human Resources Administration. We have a

2 designated friends of organization, the Foundation
3 for Dignity that has not been able access burial
4 expense funding for our burials on Staten Island. I
5 truly appreciate the many changes being made, and I
6 am almost done, I see my time is almost up, the many
7 changes that have been made through the recent
8 legislation to the program, but as we heard from
9 questions today, the fact there is still a 13%
10 approval rate for applications and there's still a
11 somewhat, I think problematic travel process for
12 getting to Hart Island, I think that we can all agree
13 that burial in a home borough by cemetery
14 professionals in a cemetery that is easily accessible
15 is still preferable to burial on Hart Island. Staten
16 Island has been doing this for over 30 years. There
17 are a couple of things that I just want flag for you.
18 The FEMA reimbursement was mentioned, and that is
19 hopefully, going to be a great resource for folks,
20 but I have heard from constitutes on Staten Island
21 that the cause of death, at least on Staten Island is
22 not on death certificates. We reached out to our
23 local hospital, Richmond University Medical Center
24 and were told that these individuals would need to
25 contact the Department of Health for the cause of

2 death documentation. I see this as highly
3 problematic and hope that the Council can work with
4 the Department of Health on a way to make this
5 information readily and easily accessible to
6 relatives seeking burial reimbursement from FEMA, and
7 the last thing that I'll mention cause I know I'm out
8 of time. Last year, Councilwoman Rose sponsored
9 Intro 2062, 2020 which would amend the administrative
10 code of the City of New York to allow expedited
11 access to death certificates to the public
12 administrators. She introduced this legislation
13 through the staff of Public Administrator's Offices,
14 a city agency will not have to wait for hours if they
15 go to the records office or for months via mail for
16 decedent death certificates which delay the office's
17 ability to administer estates and constitutes a
18 terrible waste of estate wealth and of city
19 resources. I request that the Committee on Health,
20 where this legislation is, hold a hearing on this
21 legislation as soon as it can, and I'm also asking
22 the Chair of the Committees here today to sign on as
23 co-sponsors of this legislation as well as all of the
24 Committee Members. Thank you so much for your time

2 and I'm happy to answer any question when you're
3 taking questions.

4 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thanks so much
5 Commissioner Martin. I'm now going to turn to our
6 next panelist who is Amy Koplow.

7 AMY KOPLow: Okay, my name is Amy Koplow
8 and I'm the Executive Director of the Hebrew Free
9 Burial Association. We've been in existence since
10 1888 providing indigent people of the Jewish faith a
11 respectful and dignified burial. Our cemetery is in
12 Staten Island. We work closely with OCME. We work
13 with the Public Administrators, and we also work with
14 HRA. We have, for many years, have had the unique
15 classification with HRA as an organizational plan
16 which allows us to apply for the HRA indigent burial
17 benefit when there's no family. I thank this
18 Committee, the Council Members for allowing me to
19 speak and I'm also very heartened by the improvements
20 that Deputy Commissioner Godby spoke about, but there
21 is still a huge room for improvement which I do want
22 to talk about and I am also very concerned that
23 somebody who has worked with HRA now for 20 years
24 about their ability to take on and manage a whole new
25 thing which is managing indigent burials in city

2 cemetery because there are really challenges just
3 within the indigent burial benefit program. We also
4 suffer because many, many of our applications are not
5 approved. It's been very difficult during COVID. It
6 was interesting that Ms. Godby said that you can
7 email applications. We've been told that absolutely
8 not, even though the HRA office was basically closed,
9 we were still told that the applications could only
10 be faxed or submitted by mail. When nobody's in an
11 office, you know, how are they going to get the
12 applications. Applications we submitted in
13 September, we didn't get notice on until late
14 February or March. I question the training of the
15 caseworkers that come in contact with the public like
16 us. The people high up, Nicole, Natasha currently
17 were working with the terrific guy whose name is
18 Michael Sullivan whose only on loan to the
19 department. They're good, they listen, they take
20 what you say, but ...

21 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time expired.

22 AMY KOPLow: They're not, can I just
23 finish? They're not the people you deal with on a
24 daily basis who, in many cases, don't really seem to
25 know what's going on, especially when you're asked as

2 documentation to submit for a household composition
3 for somebody who died in a nursing home, and you end
4 up getting your application denied because that
5 documentation doesn't exist. So, if my time is up,
6 my time is up, but it is still problematic.

7 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you.

8 AMY KOPLow: I can answer questions based
9 on our experience.

10 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you. So, we
11 will now turn to James Donofrio.

12 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

13 JAMES DONOFRIO: (Inaudible).

14 SGT. MARTINEZ: Mr. Donofrio, you're
15 hardly audible.

16 JAMES DONOFRIO: How about now?

17 SGT. MARTINEZ: Better.

18 JAMES DONOFRIO: Okay. My clients deal
19 with HRA and it's a living nightmare. People bring
20 applications there, hand-delivered, they don't get
21 them. There's certified mail. They don't get them.
22 I don't know how they're going to take over city
23 cemetery because they have a big enough problem
24 dealing with what's going on, and if you don't
25 believe me, any Council Member, just pick up the

2 phone and call your local funeral director or funeral
3 home and ask them the problems that they have with
4 HRA. It's impossible to deal with them, the feelings
5 of frustration, it's just something that should not
6 happen. I been to City Cemetery numerous time
7 (inaudible). We should take pride in how we took
8 this pandemic because we handle (inaudible). We did
9 a great job. I had to deal with outside
10 municipalities (inaudible). They were really lost.
11 So, if you think we didn't handle this pandemic
12 properly, you know, (inaudible). I think the city
13 did a great job. Human Resources, (inaudible).
14 That's all I have to say.

15 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you very
16 much for your testimony. I will now to the Chairs to
17 see if they have any questions for our first panel.
18 Okay, so thanks again for your testimony. Seeing no
19 questions, and no hands raised from other Council
20 Members, we will now turn to our second and final
21 public panel for this hearing. So, the final will be
22 Melinda Hunt, Cathy Cebek, Barbara Burn Dolensek,
23 Theresa Kurtz, and Stuart Sorell. So, we will now
24 turn to ... (crosstalk).

2 CHAIR LEVINE: If you don't mind, Ann,
3 just a very brief comment.

4 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Okay.

5 CHAIR LEVINE: Before, we'll give our
6 next panel a moment to cue up, but I want to thank
7 everyone who just testified for pointing out very
8 clear discrepancies between what should be the
9 bureaucratic procedures and what real New Yorkers are
10 experiencing and we're going to demand clarification
11 on this on the Administration. I understand that our
12 format doesn't allow for the Administration to
13 respond, but know that we hear you, that we care
14 about these inconsistencies, and that we're going to
15 pursue answers to the points that you raised, and
16 Commissioner Frances, it's always great to see you,
17 and so, in particular, I know you have a number of
18 important points. Everything you said is going to be
19 recorded and transcribed, and we'll pursue follow up.
20 I just wanted to make that comment. Thank you again
21 to our previous panel, and I look forward to hearing
22 the next panel.

23 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you, Chair.
24 So, we will now turn to the next public panel. So,

2 again, we will be starting with Melinda Hunt. So,
3 Melinda, you may begin once the Sergeant cues you.

4 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

5 MELINDA HUNT: Thank you so much for
6 having me. I'm Melinda Hunt. I'm founder of the
7 Hart Island Project. Our mission is to provide
8 assistance to families and friends of the buried on
9 Hart Island. We host the free online database and
10 plot locations for burials starting in 1980. We
11 advocate for transparency and preservation of the
12 historic natural burial process on Hart Island, as
13 well as designating City Cemetery a national
14 monument. I wish to testify about the importance of
15 Hart Island to the people of New York, especially
16 during this pandemic. This burial process has served
17 New York City for many epidemics, providing a safe
18 and comforting experience to low-income people of
19 color who are disproportionately buried on Hart
20 Island. It should be priority and I created just a
21 list of things that I think would be positive steps
22 forward. I'm delighted to hear that the mayor has
23 appropriated funding to remove the buildings. I
24 recommend that they be removed quickly. The
25 buildings are scary to people who visit. They're a

2 reminder of Hart Island being managed by the penal
3 system for a very long time. I think the city should
4 develop a master plan for restoring the landscape
5 with native plants and engage the public in learning
6 how natural burials support the eco-system. I
7 disagree with what many Members of the City Council
8 have said about disparaging the burials on Hart
9 Island. I haven't heard any complaints about how the
10 medical examiner has worked with families. They
11 given families a lot of time and support, and I don't
12 think Members of the City Council should be shaming
13 people who have agreed to a city burial. I really
14 think that's wrong. I think that the city should
15 develop a public relations strategy for encouraging
16 people to choose natural burials as a way to preserve
17 green space in New York City and beyond. Hart Island
18 should be included as part of planning for climate
19 change, and I think Member of the City Council, you
20 should show that you care about low-income New
21 Yorkers by visiting the graves of their friends and
22 family and inviting them to be part of turning Hart
23 Island into a National Park that honors their
24 contributions to building our city and our country.
25 Mother's Day is this Sunday. Hart Island is a

2 beautiful and scared place that should be opened on
3 Mother's Day every year. Let's celebrate the end of
4 this pandemic by planting a landscape of tomorrow to
5 honor the lives lost to COVID. Thank you for
6 permitting me to speak today.

7 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you for your
8 testimony. We will now turn to Cathy Cebek for your
9 testimony.

10 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

11 CATHY CEBEK: Hi, good afternoon. Thank
12 you for having me. I came to this hearing to speak
13 about the future of Hart Island. I'm a resident of
14 City Island and member of our Local Civic
15 Association, and as far as the burial process, as a
16 New Yorker, to what I just listened to, I would think
17 it would be difficult for the public in their grief
18 to manage their way through every alphabet agency
19 there is, but that's not what I came to speak about,
20 but I think it would be difficult. I wanted to refer
21 to the capital money to clean up the island, demolish
22 the buildings. I'm not sure if you're aware, I
23 submitted last time, a New York Sanitation report of
24 an inspection back in the 80s that there were gallons
25 of lead paint, there were drums containing PCBs,

2 asbestos fanned throughout the building, large
3 asbestos-covered pipes running above the ground on
4 the east end of the island, and there's a report from
5 that and it should be; I'll mail a copy to Ann
6 Balkin, who was very nice and helped out, but I'm
7 speaking for our community. I feel our community has
8 been ignored the last two hearings we had. We live
9 in City Island. I think Hart Island should remain
10 respectful and dignified for the people that are
11 buried there. There are many City Islanders that do
12 have relatives that are buried there as New York City
13 to become a National Park or any type of destination
14 location other than respectful remembrance of the
15 dead, personally, I would find appalling. Our
16 community is very small. The only way to reach that
17 island right now is through a residential street
18 where there's no parking to get on a bus or a ferry
19 to go to Hart Island. The ACLU, even in their
20 statement and testimony stated that that area is not
21 conducive to major travel. We live on an island, one
22 way on, one way off, we have 20,000 every weekend
23 here. We have had no municipal service in the past
24 year, not much traffic agents, police, I don't see
25 anything beyond \$50 million is just to demolish

2 buildings. We're concerned about our health, any of
3 those things making their way through our community,
4 and we just, how are we going to fit access to a
5 public park on an island, one way in, one way out
6 without a voice. Our Councilman's voice was not
7 heard in this hearing. The hearing before, our
8 former Councilman had expressed the concerns about
9 community and I feel the City Council has not reached
10 out to our community and even in your committee
11 report, does not mention our community, and our
12 Councilman is a hard-working Councilman who advocates
13 for our community, and you're not listening to his
14 voice and thank you. I think that's it. If anyone
15 has any questions about our community and the access
16 to it, I've been to Hard more times than probably
17 anyone on this panel, having lived here for decades,
18 been on that island during the 60s, the 70s ...
19 (crosstalk).

20 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time expired.

21 CATHY CEBEK: So, if you have any
22 questions about that, feel free to ask me. Thank
23 you. I appreciate the time.

24 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you. We're
25 now going to turn to our next panelist who is Barbara

2 Burn Dolensek. So, you may begin once the Sergeant
3 cues you.

4 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

5 BARBARA BURNS DOLENSEK: Thank you. I
6 too, have been a resident of City Island for many
7 years, for over 45 years and as an officer of both
8 the City Island Civic Association and the City Island
9 Historical Society, I would like to speak out on two
10 aspects of the Burial Capacity Study proposed by the
11 HRA for Hart Island. As noted in the study, the only
12 access to Hart Island is by ferry from City Island.
13 That's the only mention of City Island. Since access
14 to Hart Island should also be made part of this study
15 since it is where bodies are conveyed to Hart Island
16 as well as visitation in the future which is expected
17 to increase. There were two (inaudible) held by the
18 Department of Transportation during the last two
19 years, but to my knowledge, this was never carried or
20 at least, the community which had asked, and
21 Councilman Gjonaj had also asked that we be made part
22 of it, we've never heard from anybody about it. Now,
23 that New York City has a viable ferry system, Hart
24 Island should be considered as a destination for
25 visitors traveling by ferry from other parts of the

2 city, rather than using City Island as the only
3 access point. More important; however, although not
4 discussed at all by anyone today, is the issue of
5 cremation, and I believe I speak for virtually all
6 City Island residents and businesses when I say that
7 the very idea of putting a crematorium on Hart Island
8 will meet with virtually unanimous opposition. The
9 Environment Protection Agency does not regulate the
10 emissions produced by crematoria; although it has
11 been documented that such emissions can contain
12 mercury and other hazardous substances and there are
13 no other federal rules or regulation regarding
14 crematoria. I believe it would be a waste of both
15 time and money to study the potential for a
16 crematorium on Hart Island as there is currently no
17 power on the island to run such a facility and then
18 negative response from neighboring communities
19 including City Island would be considerable. The
20 very fact that the Human Resources Administration
21 would consider placing a crematorium next to the
22 largest public park in New York City, let alone City
23 Island with its 4500 inhabitants indicates a lack of
24 understanding of a negative response that such a

2 proposal would face and a waste of funding to study
3 the issue. Thank you for letting me speak.

4 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you for your
5 testimony. We will now turn to Theresa Kurtz. You
6 may begin once the Sergeant cues you.

7 SGT. KOTOWSKI: Time starts now.

8 THERESA KURTZ: Thank you. I just want
9 to say that as someone who has been a resident on
10 City Island for most of my life, I do have a relative
11 buried there, I do appreciate that now we can go
12 there. However, I really am concerned that making it
13 a National Park or a public park will affect the
14 dignity and respect that the people buried there
15 deserve, and everything I feel was already addressed
16 by Cathy Cebek, so I will leave it at that. Thank
17 you for listening to me.

18 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Thank you. So, I
19 will now turn it to any Council Members who may have
20 questions. As a reminder, you can use the Zoom raise
21 hand function to ask any questions you may have of
22 this panel. All right, so seeing none ... (crosstalk).

23 CHAIR LEVINE: Ann, if I may, very
24 briefly.

25 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Go ahead.

2 CHAIR LEVINE: I want to thank this
3 panel. First, just a word about Melinda Hunt who has
4 done so much over the years to bring openness and
5 transparency and access and dignity to Hart Island
6 and I'm really grateful for your leadership on this
7 issue. You've done so much to bring this to the
8 public's attention and that's just so important, and
9 to our friends at City Island, I do want to relay
10 some of the concerns. I know of no serious plan to
11 do cremation on the island. There are a variety of
12 objections, even beyond those that you've voice, so I
13 don't think that has to be taken as a serious
14 proposal, and you know, as for the vision of the
15 island as a park, this is an isolated place, and I
16 think under any scenario, it would be more limited
17 access and a more dignified place than you're typical
18 public park. This is not going to be a place for
19 hotdog vendors and other such stuff. This is going
20 to be the kind of place that people can come to pay
21 homage and reverence to those who are buried there to
22 sulk in the stunning natural beauty, to learn about
23 the incredible history of a century and a half, more
24 than a century and half on the island, and we have
25 heard over the years real concerns from residents of

2 City Island about what greater access would mean for
3 City Island and you know, there are also multiple
4 other points of departure in the Bronx and in Queens
5 that might ultimately be preferable. I think that
6 question remains open. So, I hope that residents of
7 City Island approach this with open minds and with
8 the sense of the great possibilities that this island
9 offers. That's it for me on a comment on this panel,
10 and Ann, are we ready to wrap up at this point?

11 MODERATOR ANN BALKIN: Yes. I was just
12 going to see if we had inadvertently missed anyone
13 who may have registered to testify today who has not
14 yet been called, please use the Zoom raise hand
15 function now. All right, so now we are officially
16 ready to wrap up, Chair Levine.

17 CHAIR LEVINE: Well, I think I'll cue
18 Chair Koo. Chair Koo, would you like to make any
19 final remarks.

20 CHAIR KOO: Yes. Thank you, Chair
21 Levine. I want to thank all the panelists who came
22 to testify, and I heard all of your suggestions and
23 in this Council, our Council Members will do our
24 utmost to solve the problems on the residents of City
25 Island. Death is really a touchy subject. Nobody

2 wants to talk about death, you know. We all welcome
3 birth. So, we all have to pass, so, I think we have
4 to give these people a dignified, respectful way of
5 burial and that their families have accessible and a
6 way to visit their deceased. You know, this is the
7 minimum we can do. So, I respect all of your
8 comments and suggestions and our Council Members, and
9 our Speaker will try to do the utmost to help all of
10 you. Thank you.

11 CHAIR LEVINE: And I'll just add, first
12 off Chair Koo, gratitude for your leadership on Parks
13 in general and on this topic today. We're really
14 lucky to have you join the Parks Committee, so thank
15 you for your leadership, Chair Koo.

16 CHAIR KOO: Thank you.

17 CHAIR LEVINE: And I want to thank
18 everyone who spoke today from the public, and I just
19 want to reiterate my belief that we have an
20 opportunity now to do something incredibly meaningful
21 for Hart Island so that it really is a place that
22 offers a dignified final resting place for our loved
23 ones who have been buried there and who continue to
24 be buried there. Victims of infectious disease,
25 victims of neglect, people who have been isolated and

2 impoverished in life, and we do want to be able to
3 uplift them in their final resting place. So, thank
4 you all so much. That's it for me, and unless
5 there's any other business, Ann, this will conclude
6 our hearing.

7 CHAIR KOO: I also want to thank the
8 Committee staff, you know, for doing a wonderful job
9 in putting everything together, and I also want to
10 thank everyone for taking the time to testify today.
11 The pandemic has understandably highlighted many the
12 system issues and concerns we have on Hart Island,
13 especially in terms of access to the island to visit
14 their loved ones. We are just under two months
15 before the island is formerly transferred to the
16 Parks Department and we hope that the agencies who
17 testified today will take what we have heard from our
18 panels into consideration and work to find the best
19 way to serve New Yorkers. So, thank everyone.

20 CHAIR LEVINE: Thank you, Chair Koo, and
21 this will conclude our hearing. Thank you so much
22 everybody.

23

24

25

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 July 1, 2021