



Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and Addiction
*Jointly with the Committee on Hospitals, the Committee on Fire and Emergency Management and
the Committee on Public Safety*

Mayor Adams' Directive Regarding Mental Health Involuntary Removals
February 6, 2023

Oral Testimony Delivered to the New York City Council by the Drug Policy Alliance

Good afternoon, my name is Toni Smith and I am the New York State Director for the Drug Policy Alliance, also a member of Communities United for Police Reform. Thank you to the joint committees of the council for holding this hearing.

The Drug Policy Alliance is the leading organization in the U.S. promoting alternatives to the war on drugs and we oppose the Mayor's directive. It will be harmful to people struggling with substance use who are likely to get swept up in the enforcement of this directive by continuing policies that punish people for substance use, perpetuate stigma, and ignore evidence-based care.

This directive goes far beyond anything related to mental health and mobilizes the NYPD to sweep up essentially anyone who is experiencing street homelessness. The NYPD has a terrible record of responding to people experiencing or perceived to be experiencing a mental health crisis, routinely abuses homeless New Yorkers, primarily inflicting harm on Black and Brown New Yorkers.

The Mayor's directive attempts to simplify the problem as people not being able to identify that they need support. In fact, our voluntary care systems are significantly limited on the basis of cost, cultural competency, capacity, and insurance, causing many people who are voluntarily seeking care to be shut out.

This is particularly true for people with co-occurring health needs, including substance use disorder. We need more low-barrier, person-centered, voluntary care options and more supportive housing. Forced treatment is criminalization by another name, and like criminalization it is not effective to address root causes of instability and unwellness. Inadequate funding for education, housing, health and other social services creates the conditions that destabilize people's lives and contribute to health issues, intensifying the services people then require to achieve health and stability. For the many people who will be swept up through this directive who have a substance use disorder, being forcibly hospitalized can lead to painful and sometimes life-threatening withdrawal symptoms and place them at increased risk of overdose death.

This directive tries to mask the function of police. Police are the front line of criminalization, not public health. And the disruption and trauma people experience at the hands of the NYPD only creates more of the instability and health challenges that the mayor claims to be addressing. We are calling on the city council to prioritize funding for actual public health solutions and oppose the mayor's directive. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.