



INDEPENDENT  
PRISON OVERSIGHT  
SINCE 1844

## **CANY's Recommendations to Improve Safety, Institutional Culture, and Living & Working Conditions within DOCCS Facilities**

**JANUARY 2025**

The Correctional Association of New York (CANY) maintains an extraordinarily deep and broad understanding of New York's state correctional facilities. This understanding allows for nuanced assessment of the greatest challenges DOCCS faces in safely operating institutions that support rehabilitation, public safety, and human dignity. CANY's vantage also affords the ability to identify examples of good policy and practice, of which there are many within DOCCS. The following recommendations, which take into consideration both persistent challenges and opportunities to scale up examples of excellence, were submitted to DOCCS for a statutory 60-day review period on October 9, 2024—two months to the day before Robert Brooks was fatally assaulted at Marcy Correctional Facility.

These recommendations arise from CANY's unique historical role as the independent oversight entity for state correctional facilities and activities authorized by Correction Law 146(3), which grants the organization authority "to access, visit, inspect, and examine all state correctional facilities with seventy-two hours advance notice to the department." In FY24, CANY conducted 19 prison monitoring visits; interviewed more than 1,000 incarcerated individuals and more than one hundred state employees who work in these facilities; received hundreds of phone calls, letters, and website inquiries from or on behalf of incarcerated people seeking assistance; distributed thousands of surveys; and published 15 public-facing work products including [reports on monitoring visits](#), [dashboards of processed administrative data](#), data analysis, and legislative testimony. To inform the discussion about prison closures, CANY published a series of tools that allow stakeholders to view staffing levels by facility: [Mapping Closures, Capacity, Staffing, and the Evolving Landscape of NY's Prisons](#).

These recommendations have also been informed through extensive engagement with relevant stakeholders in New York State and beyond. CANY schedules regular meetings to exchange information with legislators representing districts across the

state, representatives from state agencies, local government partners, service provider organizations, advocacy groups, and research institutions. Owing to CANY's reputation as a credible, professional independent oversight organization, CANY's staff have presented at conferences, roundtables, and convenings on topics ranging from deaths in custody to healthcare in correctional settings to best practices in prison oversight nationally and internationally.

CANY's on-the-ground monitoring, which presents an unparalleled opportunity for independent observers to document living and working conditions in state prisons, has a direct bearing on public policy. For example, a bill recently signed into law by Governor Hochul ([A. 9169 Burdick / S. 7781 Harckham](#)) requires the state to mitigate extreme heat in correctional facilities. The language of this legislation was drawn from a recommendation CANY made about dangerously hot conditions observed during a monitoring visit to [Coxsackie Correctional Facility](#). CANY has also recommended that DOCCS notify the public when an incarcerated person dies in custody—a recommendation that lawmakers took up ([A. 7854B Epstein / S. 7607B Salazar](#)) in the 2024 legislative session.

CANY's [report on its 2022 monitoring visit to Marcy Correctional Facility](#) documented allegations of pervasive abuse, misconduct, racial discrimination, and neglect. CANY has [repeatedly recommended](#) that the state expedite [the installation of stationary cameras and the deployment of body-worn cameras systemwide](#); that recommendation is repeated here, below.

The use of cameras in prisons may lead to fewer instances of extreme, life-threatening violence, but they are not a cure-all. DOCCS must work with partners in and outside of government to address the systemic issues that allow brutality to flourish, many of which have been described in CANY's reporting following interviews with thousands of incarcerated people over the past few years alone. CANY has urged DOCCS to partner with external organizations focused on culture change within correctional facilities and to examine the underlying causes of violence by engaging a diverse array of stakeholders. On December 30, 2024, Governor Kathy Hochul announced [landmark commitments](#) in response to these recommendations.

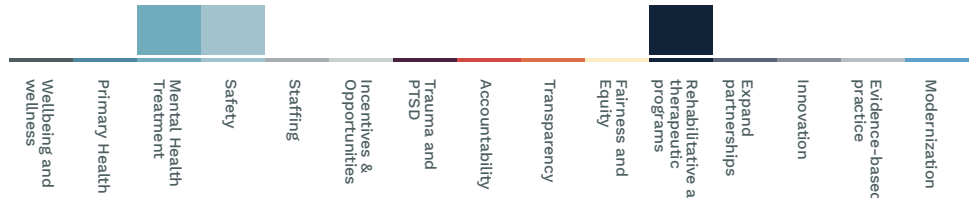
The killing of Robert Brooks demands a fundamental break from the culture of violence, contempt, and neglect that has for too long characterized New York's prisons. The following recommendations are presented in the spirit of partnership with the State of New York so that this event is remembered not just as a tragedy, but as a watershed moment for transparency, accountability and lasting change at all levels within the state correctional system.

# CANY Recommendations 2025

Page 3 of 7

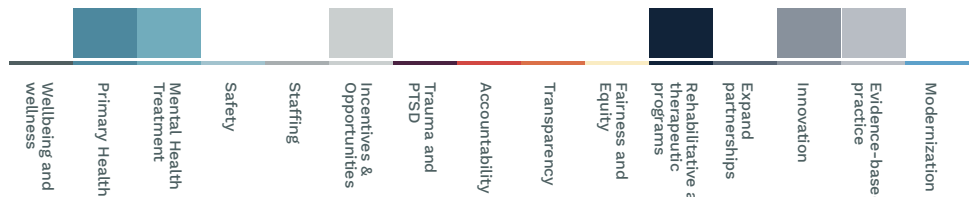
## 01

Replace all mental health and crisis bed capacity eliminated by the closure of Great Meadow and Sullivan Correctional Facilities.



## 02

Expand peer navigation programs, peer-led facilitation opportunities, and the use of “credible messengers” for violence interruption and reduction. Provide robust support to and encouragement of incarcerated organizations at all facilities.



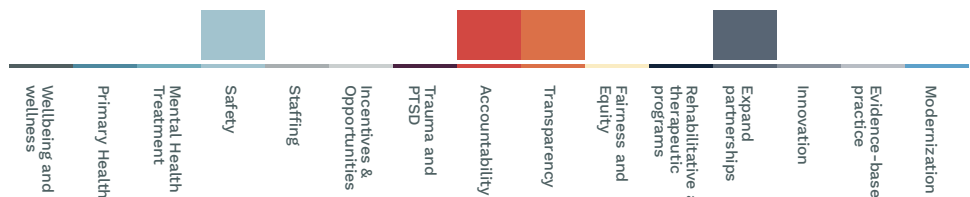
## 03

Finalize agreement with the Office of Mental Health (OMH) on the delivery of programming in Residential Rehabilitation Units (RRU).



## 04

Include external stakeholders as permanent members of the Prison Violence Task Force.



## 05

Engage research partners to study causes of violence and mechanisms for increasing safety and publish the results.



# CANY Recommendations 2025

Page 4 of 7

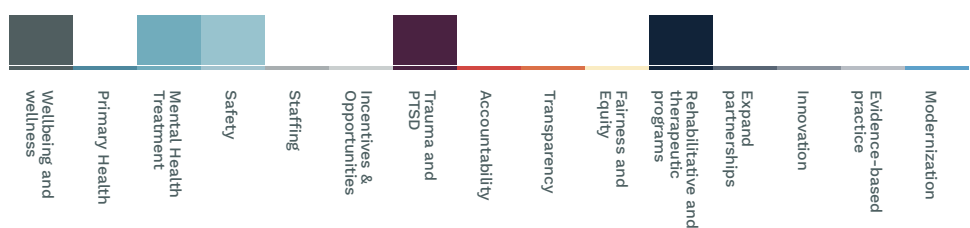
## 06

Continue and expand trainings on staff wellness for DOCCS employees.



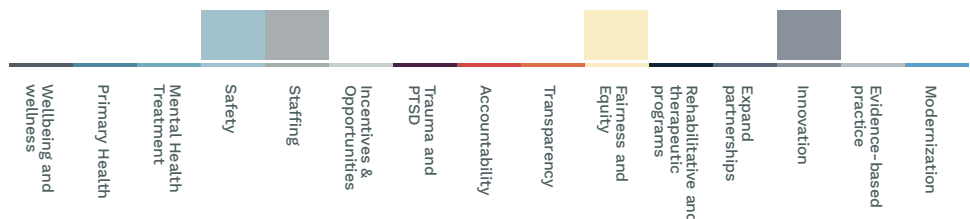
## 07

Expand use of Trauma, Addiction, Mental Health, and Recovery (TAMAR) curriculum so that it is offered regularly in all facilities. Provide incentives for participation.



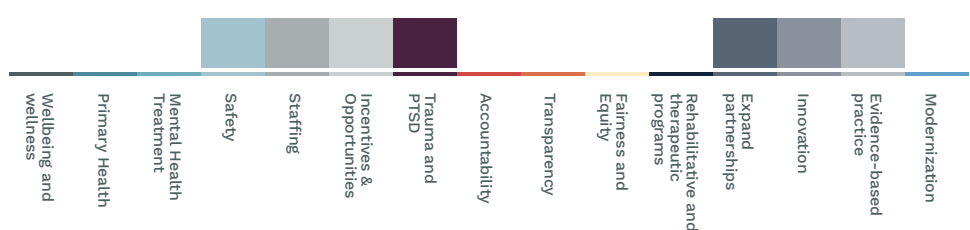
## 08

Expand staff recruitment/retention initiatives like the Central NY 200 Recruitment Initiative and discretionary changes to the negotiated reassignment list.



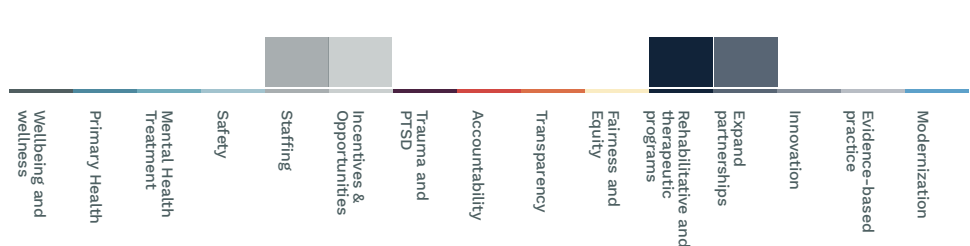
## 09

Partner with external organizations focused on culture change inside correctional facilities.



## 10

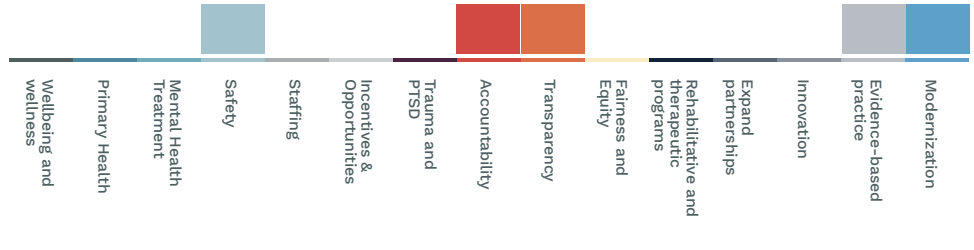
Partner with SUNY to certify skilled trades and career training programs and provide opportunities to transfer credits earned through those programs.



# CANY Recommendations 2025

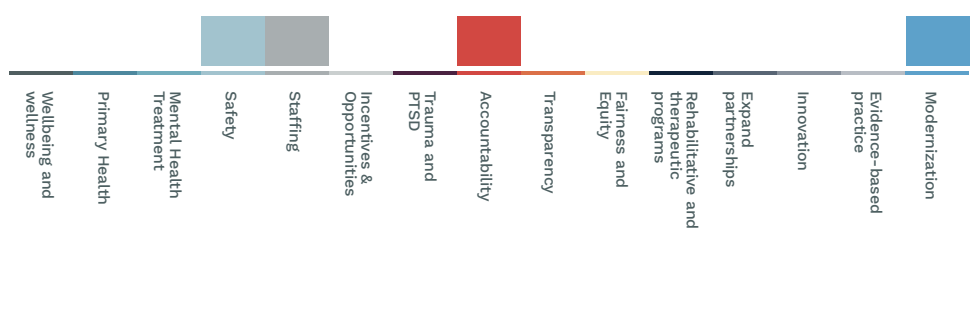
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Expedite the installation of fixed cameras throughout all DOCCS facilities; expand the use of body cameras and their operating times; and make footage available to incarcerated individuals for the purposes of disciplinary hearings and grievances.



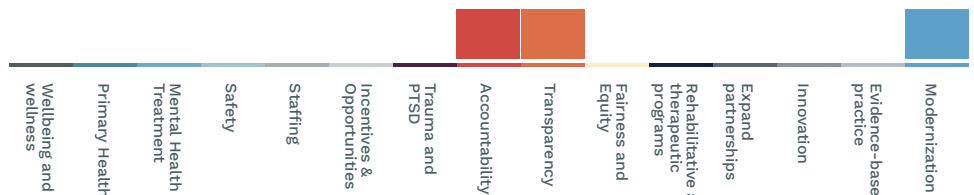
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Launch a multi-year plan to modernize record-keeping systems, spanning such services and operations as incarcerated individual property transfers, accounts, sick call requests, grievances, and program attendance; electronic medical records; and data management infrastructure to replace legacy systems.



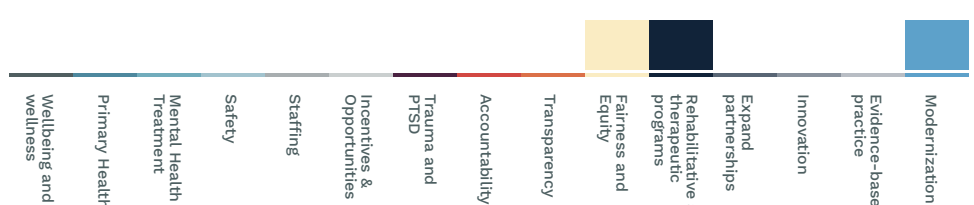
13

Make documents such as directives, policies, memoranda, and CORC decisions readily accessible to incarcerated individuals and to the general public.



14

Modernize and upgrade technology equipment used by staff and incarcerated people in offices, libraries, law libraries, and computer labs across facilities.



15

Publish five-year capital plans, annexing any portions that contain sensitive security information.

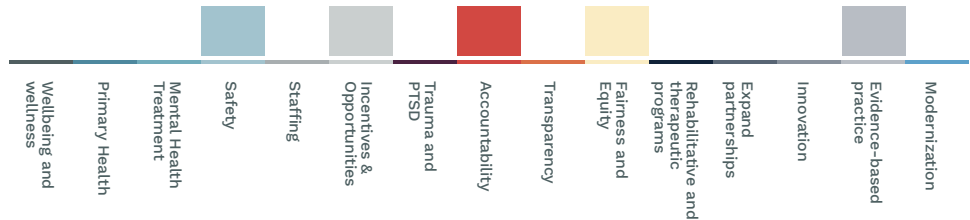


# CANY Recommendations 2025

Page 6 of 7

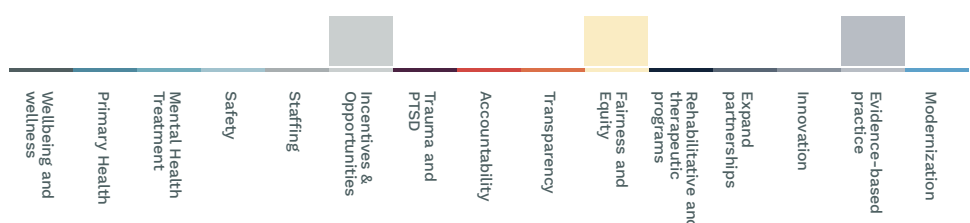
## 16

Develop additional strategies for recognizing achievements and good conduct by issuing positive informational reports or commendations to incarcerated individuals.



## 17

Expand earned housing opportunities as incentives for incarcerated people.



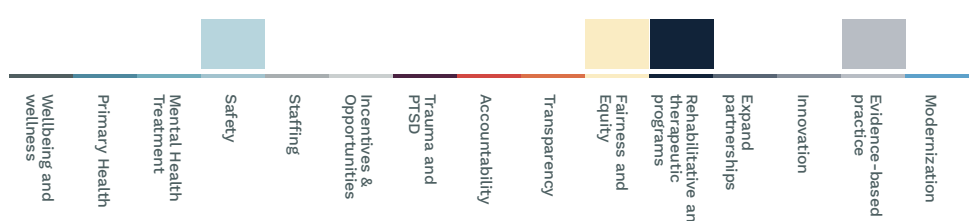
## 18

Expand partnerships with local animal shelters to provide additional dog training and rehabilitation programming.



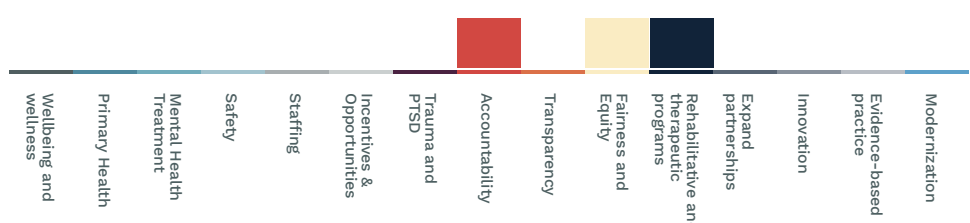
## 19

Make ASAT, ART, SOCTP, and other mandatory therapeutic programs available earlier in an individual's incarceration.



## 20

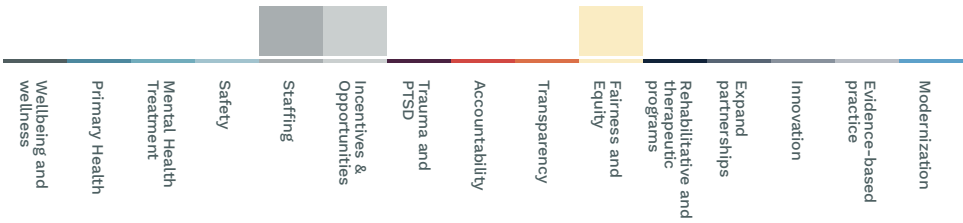
Ensure that individuals with conditional release dates have the opportunity to complete mandatory programs before the Time Allowance Committee reviews their eligibility for release.



# CANY Recommendations 2025

## 21

Highlight staff excellence through expanded train-the-trainer opportunities, profiles in the DOCCS Today newsletter, videos such as “Healing from the Inside Out,” and other forums.

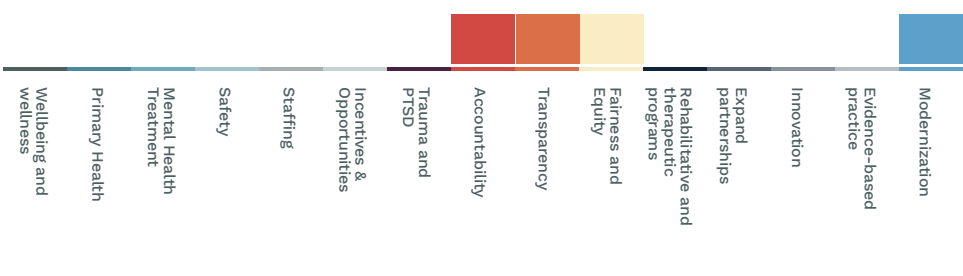


## Recommendations to Improve the Incarcerated Grievance Program

In 2023 CANY published "[Smoke Screen: Experiences with the Incarcerated Grievance Program in New York State Prisons](#)." These recommendations stem from the findings contained in that report, which cited that 87% of respondents considered the IGP "not effective" or "seldom effective."

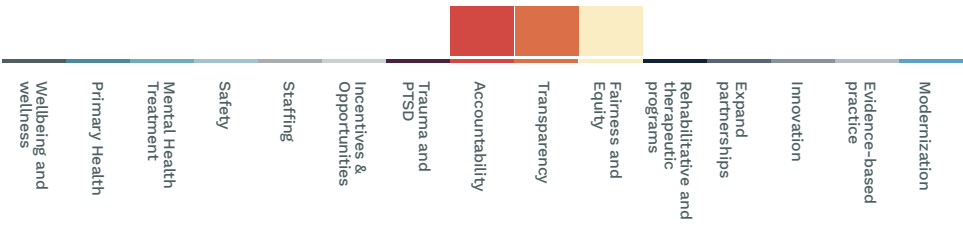
## 22

Improve the Incarcerated Grievance Program (IGP) by making procedures for election of the Incarcerated Grievance Resolution Committee (IGRC) standard across facilities; allowing IGRC representatives to carry out meaningful investigations into grievances; providing additional detail about the roles of IGP supervisor and IGP sergeant in Directive 4040; and recording IGRC hearings.



## 23

Create a task force comprised of relevant stakeholders, including incarcerated individuals and DOCCS staff, to identify and address systemic issues that lead to delays in grievance processing. Actively seek input from this group to understand the most common problems they encounter with the grievance process and collaborate on developing practical solutions.



## 24

Expand annual public reporting on the IGP to include deidentified details of cases including the rate of acceptance, denial, and dismissal by category, as well as the length of time for resolution of each grievance at each stage; specific actions taken by the department to address the grieved issue; and disaggregated instances of “consolidated” grievances.

