

Public advocate makes recommendations to improve mental health services

By EMILY NGO

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New York Public Advocate Jumaane Williams speaks as he faces against with New York Gov. Kathy Hochul and Rep. Tom Suozzi, D-N.Y., during a New York governor primary debate. (Craig Ruttle/Pool via AP)

To begin helping New Yorkers struggling with acute mental health challenges, including those sleeping on the subway, the city's public advocate seeks what he calls a holistic response.

"It is vital to envision and enact what actually address the roots of public safety, including mental health," Public Advocate Jumaane Williams said.

On Friday, he presented a frame that served as an update to his 2019 report and called again in large part for non-police responses to non-criminal emergencies.

"I think officers should be trained in case

they're needed, in case they're called," Williams said. "But law enforcement should not be the default made to people who are in mental health crisis."

He spoke at a lower Manhattan subway station alongside activists and advocates.

"Imagine that someone who has had interaction with law enforcement, going through a mental health crisis and then seeing that uniform and potentially a weapon," said Jordyn Rosenthal of Community Access.

The public advocate's new recommendations include expanding Mobile Crisis Team hours of operation, creating a hotline for those in crisis

that doesn't involve police, annual mental health screenings for public school students and building supportive housing for homeless individuals.

"Right now, the two choices for people who cannot easily access mental health care is on the street or Rikers Island," Williams said.

Mayor Adams' spokesperson, Fabien Levy, didn't respond to the specific recommendations. But he noted Adams' \$171 million investment in safe haven and stabilization beds and three drop-in centers, as well as the opening of an additional support center for those with serious mental illness.

"We agree that much work remains to support our most vulnerable and keep all New Yorkers safe," Levy added.

The public advocate touted the importance of the B-HEARD program. But the Behavioral Health Emergency Assistance Response Division has seen its budget cut by \$12 million during Adams' tenure.

City Hall said the program wasn't using its full budget.