

Meropi Peponides Testimony  
New York City FY25 Preliminary Public Safety Hearing  
March 20th, 2024

My name is Meropi Peponides. I am a New Yorker, a nonprofit worker, an artist based in Flatbush Brooklyn, and a member of the Justice Committee, a grassroots organization working to end police violence in NYC.

I am writing because the preliminary budget laid out by the Mayor has once again prioritized resourcing the NYPD over the needs of our communities.

In the past three months, I have seen the impact of Mayor Adams' austerity budget on my predominately Black and Latinx neighborhood. Libraries were forced to cut hours at a time of year where indoor public spaces are vital to the well-being of families and all New Yorkers in need of supportive, safe places, and access to information.

As an artist who makes work in collaboration with everyday New Yorkers, my small nonprofit arts organization has experienced a more than 10% reduction in our previously awarded city funding, causing us to have to make painful cuts to our programming, which directly impacts our ability to serve the working people of this city. It has also impacted our ability to hire artists for our programs. In addition to our own budget difficulties I have spoken to colleagues across organizations large and small who are feeling the effects of this austerity budget. Cultural programs are not the only services being severely underfunded in NYC. Essential services like affordable housing and mental healthcare are continuously deprioritized year after year. NYCHA has been underfunded by 1.89 billion dollars since 2001.

Meanwhile, the NYPD continues to receive funding increases each year. This includes the Strategic Response Group (SRG), a violent unit that was originally tasked with doing "single-fold terror work", but who have regularly been deployed to police nonviolent protests in the past several years. As well as the neighborhood safety teams, which have been rebranded from the former anti-crime unit that systemically terrorizes New Yorkers. The current estimated spending of the SRG, is \$133 million a year. Meanwhile, the entire budget of the Cultural Development Fund, the body that distributes much needed resources to Arts and Cultural organizations like my own, is only \$52 million and they are not the only service that is being severely underfunded. How do we expect New Yorkers to thrive when both their essential services and cultural resources are under continuous budget cuts?

The fact that a violent unit of police officers who are often deployed against my fellow citizens protesting injustice has a budget nearly three times that of all cultural funding in New York City sends a clear message that the Mayor's budget prioritizes repressing the voices of nonviolent protest over and above resourcing the important cultural organizations of our city. This

allocation of our public funds is misguided and does nothing to ensure real safety for New Yorkers.

After the racial justice uprisings of 2020 were met with violent crackdown by the SRG, and the protests for Palestinian freedom that have taken place in the last five months have been met with increased repression and similarly violent tactics, not to mention numerous other instances of violent behavior by the SRG, it is past time that the city council disband this unit of the NYPD, ensure that those officers are not reabsorbed into the force to enact the same violence elsewhere in our communities, and redirect these resources.

I urge the city council to reallocate the necessary funds that are currently being spent to repress everyday New Yorkers into restoring crucial library and arts funding as well as investing in services that actually increase community safety. This includes supportive housing, non-carceral mental health support and properly resourcing our public schools.

I urge the mayor and city council to stop giving the NYPD preferential treatment by allowing the NYPD to go significantly over budget without consequence. The NYPD should be subject to the same PEGs the rest of city services are, and the mayor and city council should reinvest in services that all new yorkers need to thrive. I hope the city council will finally take the crucial and overdue step of using those funds to resource our communities.