

Rikers Island gets renovated visitor center

By Noah Powelson
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As New Yorkers across the city prepare to spend what time they can with their family behind bars during the holidays, Rikers officials unveiled a newly refurbished, child-friendly visitors center on the notorious island this week.

In partnership with the Children's Museum of Manhattan, the Department of Correction opened a newly renovated Benjamin Ward Visit Center on Rikers Island on Tuesday. The renovation includes a new HVAC system, interactive educational exhibits, seasonal decorations, new lockers, as well as additional games, toys and coloring books.

New York City Department of Correction Commissioner Lynelle Maginley-Liddie cut the ribbon on the new visitor center, which is the fourth such installation CMOM placed on Rikers Island. Maginley-Liddie said the renovated center is not just for looks, but aims to encourage visits and keep detainees connected with their loved ones so they can have a better support network after release.

"There is no greater motivator than family," Maginley-Liddie said after the ribbon cutting. "More frequent visits mean creating closer bonds, which means keeping family together."

According to the DOC, over 86,000 people visited Rikers Island in 2024, including 12,000 children.

So far in 2025, Rikers has seen 64,000 adults and 10,000 children visit the facilities. If the numbers reflect last year's total, over 2,000 children and their caretakers could be spending part of the holidays on Rikers Island.

The city is legally mandated to close Rikers Island by 2027, a deadline the city is unlikely to



New York City Department of Corrections Commissioner Lynelle Maginley-Liddie cuts the ribbon on the renovated Benjamin Ward Visit Center on Riker's Island alongside representatives of the DOC and the Children's Museum of Manhattan.

Photo courtesy of the Department of Corrections

be able to meet. While construction on new borough-based jails has started across the city, the earliest is scheduled to open in 2029, two years after the deadline. The final jail isn't expected to be completed until 2032.

But regardless if the city does close the island by the deadline or after, the CMOM installations and displays will still have a place in the city's jails, the DOC said. The installations are durable and built to be easily transported between locations, and spokesperson for CMOM said they were already in early planning talks to transfer installation to new locations when needed.

Leslie Bushara, the chief program officer at CMOM, had been working with the DOC to create art installations and family programs for

detainees. Bushara said they are planning on creating more installations for the other visitor centers on the island in the future, and there are currently two for the outdoor areas and young adult men facilities in the works.

"When the children come here, and there is no safe or fun place, it makes it very hard for families to bring them here," Bushara told the Eagle. "The goal is to help change the visitation culture for families."

These visitor centers are often managed by Visit Facilitators, and at the renovated Benjamin Ward Visit Center, that responsibility belongs to Zandra Daniels.

Daniels is often the only staff at the center supervising eight to 10 children at a time along with their guardians, who can be waiting in the visitor's center anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. While the center offers a variety of activities to keep families occupied, it can only do so much to calm children who have, at certain times, gone through traumatic episodes seeing loved ones incarcerated.

The redesign, Daniels said, helps ease the tensions for children nervous to see their loved ones locked up.

"It's a wonderful enhancement," Daniels told the Eagle. "[This center] is the last happy place they are in before going to see their loved ones."