

# Fifty Years of Justice in Practice

Key Moments From CJA's History



**50** CJA  
YEARS OF  
New York City  
Criminal Justice  
Agency

## A word from CJA's Executive Director

As I read and reflect on this document, I'm struck by how CJA's core values of commitment, fairness and innovation have driven the institution from its founding to the present day.

For five decades, our staff have worked 24/7 in the city's main courthouses, discharging our historic mission to treat people humanely, provide judges with critical information designed to encourage nonmonetary conditions of release, improve court appearance rates and provide data insights about critical pretrial justice issues. CJA's unique status as an independent nonprofit with a fundamental role in the pretrial process and deep access to data has also allowed the agency to experiment in critical moments such as our launch of the Supervised Release program in Queens in 2009 and our more recent work to make a common and trusted set of pretrial facts publicly available through pretrial data dashboards.

Since 1973, we've seen gradual improvements in pretrial outcomes that have added up to transformational change, as New York City has dramatically reduced its jail population while also improving public safety.

I'm deeply grateful for the contributions made by the people profiled and pictured in these pages. This includes the CJA interviewers (now called Pretrial Associates) who continue to work diligently throughout New York City, CJA's founding executive director Jeremy Travis and the teams behind the Supervised Release program and our pretrial data dashboarding work.

I am very excited to celebrate CJA's 50th anniversary, and to share this history with you.



Aubrey Fox

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1973



1973-1977:

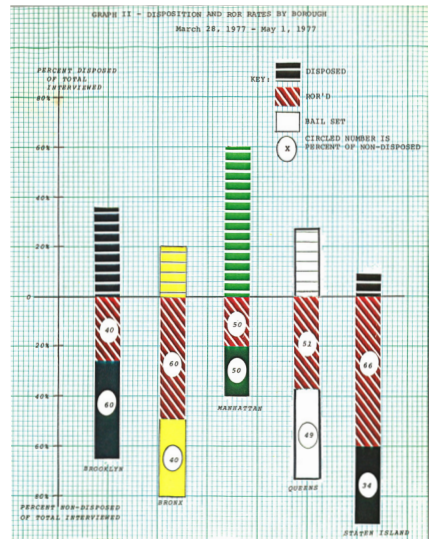
# CJA's Founding

In 1977 Disco was queen, Jimmy Carter was president, and New York City, under its diminutive, one-term mayor Abe Beame, was mired in financial crisis and teetering on the edge of bankruptcy and default.

From a modest Broadway office just north of City Hall, Jeremy Travis, then 29 years old and only recently named executive director, had been charged with transitioning a 1973 demonstration project called the Pretrial Services Agency (PTSA) into a permanent entity, the New York City Criminal Justice Agency (CJA). Earlier in the decade, the Manhattan Bail Project had shown that people accused of crime who had strong ties to the community could be released before trial and trusted to show up in court without the use of money bail. New York City's follow up application of that lesson, beginning in 1964, had operated out of the local probation department. Probation officers working in borough court houses collected information about newly arrested people and provided judges with ratings that might inform who should be released on their own recognizance, who should be detained, and who should be eligible for bail. The goal was to reduce the number of people being held in the city's crowded jails. However, probation did not fully staff the program and the jail population continued to climb. In 1970 riots in overcrowded detention facilities

in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens showed the urgent need for reform.

When it launched as a pilot program in Brooklyn three years later, PTSA was to be a fresh application of the Manhattan Bail Project's lessons. PTSA employed interviewers who were available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week across the City, and their thorough and objective information-gathering was complemented by a separate branch of the organization charged with aggregating and analyzing data to inform broader policies and practices.



1977 graph showing disposition and ROR rates by borough.



*1979 Photo of a CJA Pretrial Interviewer in Manhattan Central Booking*

“We experimented with different forms of community outreach, created a computerized notification system, and started publishing results of our reforms,” Travis recalled decades later. “It was an ambitious undertaking for a start-up agency.”

A 1974 evaluation of the new program by the celebrated sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld documented PTSA’s improvement over the prior arrangement and the fledgling organization soon expanded to serve the entire city. Still, there was no guarantee that PTSA would survive its transition from pilot to permanent. Indeed, when its certificate of incorporation as CJA was approved in early 1977, many police, prosecutors, and judges remained skeptical of the

program and its intention to reduce the use of jail.

Later that summer, when the lights unexpectedly went out across New York City, CJA’s role in court operations was put to the test. There had been blackouts before. But none like the one that started on July 13th, at 9:34 pm. Over the next 25 hours, most New Yorkers tried to adapt to life without electricity. However, many others succumbed to lawlessness. Hundreds of businesses were looted across the five boroughs—many set afire. Nearly 3,800 people were arrested in the effort to restore order.

In spite of the upheaval – which included the ongoing blackout and the unusually large number of arrestees



- interviewers worked through the night, gathering information and calling references by flashlight. “I was so proud of our staff at that time because we rallied,” Travis recalled later. “We were committed to providing our service to everybody who was ‘locked up’ so that the work of judges would be informed by what we thought was important about their background.”

CJA’s standing among system stakeholders became stronger as a result of the crisis. But less than a month later, on August 10th, the organization faced another ordeal. This time, it was the arrest of David Berkowitz, a.k.a., the Son of Sam.

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For over a year, Berkowitz had managed to elude the police while carrying out a deadly series of seemingly random shootings. Combined with his provocative, rambling letters to law enforcement officials and journalists, the shootings had sent shivers throughout the city and beyond. News of his capture was universally welcomed, and it unleashed an enormous, collective sigh of relief. But Berkowitz still lived with his parents in Yonkers and was a longtime employee of the U.S. Postal Service. So, consistent with CJA policy, the form submitted at his arraignment—to Judge Richard A. Brown, who later would go on to become Queens District Attorney—came stamped “recommended for release.”

“A firestorm of protest erupted.” Travis recalled. The protests included calls to replace the executive director and to shutter the organization altogether.

CJA’s board chair, the Deputy Mayor for Criminal Justice, moved quickly to modify the organization’s procedures. Going forward, he declared, CJA would no longer make recommendations in homicide cases. The announcement, perched on the goodwill the agency had gained during the blackout, helped the new organization ride out the crisis.

On August 14, 1977 just four days after the Son of Sam was taken into custody, a front-page story in the *New York Times* reported on CJA research showing that people arrested on looting charges during the blackout were more likely to be employed and less likely to have a previous arrest than people arrested under normal conditions. The insight, coming less than a month after the blackout, refuted a then-widely circulating notion that the looters had acted out of poverty and desperation. It also underscored the value of CJA as an emerging new resource for public safety data and research. “These and other findings,” the reporter wrote, “which criminal justice experts said could help produce important new insights into the nature of civil disorders, were compiled by the New York City Criminal Justice Agency, an independent group that interviews defendants before arraignment in order to make recommendations on bail to the court.”

“That was the summer where CJA came of age. It was like we were defending our core methodology whenever it came under attack,” Travis would later say. “Notwithstanding some pretty difficult challenges, during a really difficult summer we survived and thrived.”

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*1979 photo of CJA employee conducting an interview in the holding cells*



*1979 photo of a CJA employee filling out a pretrial interview form*

2009



2009:

# Launching the Supervised Release Program in Queens

The years following the launch of the Pretrial Services Agency in 1973 and CJA in 1977 coincided with increasing crime rates across the United States. Locally, this meant ever more people spending time within the city's jails before trial. Law enforcement-focused responses to crack cocaine use in the late 1980s dramatically accelerated jail population growth. By the time national crime rates started their historic, decades-long decline in the early 1990s, the average daily population (ADP) inside New York City Department of Correction facilities had reached nearly 22,000 people.

Increased pressure on city jails had strengthened CJA's reputation within New York's justice system. Seven days a week, 24 hours a day, staff working in borough courts interviewed newly arrested people, telephoned references to seek confirmation of what they had learned, and generated release assessments to guide judges' decisions about which individuals to release while their case moved toward resolution, whom to detain before trial, and when to use money bond. In 2008, CJA staff conducted interviews in more than 300,000 cases of people held for criminal court arraignment.

CJA leaders were sure they could do better, however, and in 2009, city officials funded the agency to experiment with a fourth option

that promised to see even more people safely released before trial: Supervised Release.

When the Queens Supervised Release (QSR) pilot project launched, it was not the first time a jurisdiction had tried to extend services to arrested people in order to reduce the use of money bail (and, for those who could not afford it, detention before trial). The federal courts, which had embraced pretrial reform almost immediately in the wake of the Manhattan Bail Project, had piloted a pretrial services project as early as 1974. Many other jurisdictions had developed similar programs, usually operating out of probation departments and functioning as an extension of law enforcement.

QSR would prove to be New York City's first demonstrably successful attempt to reduce its jail population by facilitating the release of individuals who did not qualify for ROR. The program's success depended on solving several key puzzles. These included selecting the right borough for the project, limiting intake to appropriate participants, and providing support that was effective.

CJA was well positioned to meet all of these challenges. "We worked closely with our research department to collect data across all five boroughs and to choose which borough would be more



*Queens Supervised Release Staff in their Long Island City Office*

successful,” recalled Joann De Jesus, who helped launch the project, which she continues to lead today. “More people were likely to be detained in Queens because bail setting practices there were different,” she explained. “It’s where we thought we could effect the most change.”

QSR researchers also used data to identify candidates who would be most likely to benefit from the program. Recognizing that “net widening”—admitting people who would get an ROR, absent the program—could lead to even higher rates of detention should they fail to adhere to supervision requirements, the program’s architects excluded anyone who had charges that were unlikely to result in bail. They also decided to enlist defense attorneys as “gatekeepers.”

“We would go to the defense and tell them that we had identified someone as a potential client using information from the release assessment,” De Jesus explains. Although most defense attorneys wanted their clients released on recognizance, attorneys who suspected a judge was going to assign bail would sometimes ask their clients

to consider pretrial services. “A lot of times they would take it,” De Jesus recalls. “First, you never knew how much bail the court was going to set; and second, if they knew they needed housing, or had employment concerns, or substance use concerns, or things going on with the family, they thought working with a social worker was a way to leverage additional services.”

CJA researchers also identified criteria to exclude individuals who presented too much risk. Anyone with more than six misdemeanors, for example, or who had a high likelihood of not appearing in court based on CJA’s interview process was ineligible for the program.

Participation in QSR began with an intake process to identify clients’ needs and to surface opportunities for referring them to outside services, such as support for mental health, substance use, and housing challenges. Although program staff saw their mission rooted in social work rather than surveillance, they also used the intake to identify an appropriate level of supervision, ranging from occasional telephone calls to frequent in-person visits. Prior to any court appearances the program

**“Because of CJA, we have access to an essential building block of reform: reliable, detailed, analyzable data” that can help decision makers “develop customized solutions” says Courtney Bryan, the Executive Director of the nonprofit Center for Justice Innovation.**

would forward a written report on the client’s participation and progress. When problems with compliance arose, program staff would appear in person with the report.

A 2013 evaluation showed QSR was succeeding at its primary goal of seeing more people safely released: Nearly 90 percent of participants completed the program, only 3 percent exited due to a failure to appear in court, and re-arrests, when they did occur, were overwhelmingly for non-felony charges. The program also revealed a startling characteristic within the medium-risk population it was serving: Nearly half of QSR participants were found to have substance use or mental health needs, or both. QSR’s intervention saw more than half of these people—who previously would have gone under or undiagnosed—voluntarily connected to community-based services to address their specific challenges.

QSR’s success quickly led to similar pilot projects in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and in 2016 New York City replicated the model across all five boroughs.

In its ongoing commitment to innovation and improving outcomes, in 2018 QSR expanded its staff to include Peer Specialists, certified practitioners who have overcome

personal challenges that are common among many clients, such as mental health diagnoses, addiction, and homelessness. The peer staff have made the QSR even more effective at connecting clients to services and supports. “We find that when we can offer our clients someone to talk to who has already walked in their shoes, it can inspire hope and change,” says De Jesus. “You’re not going to get that through the corrections system.”

The city-wide Pretrial Services program was further expanded in 2019. Since 2020, when bail reform legislation was implemented across the state, the service has been available to anyone who is arrested in the city. According to the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, the pilot project that CJA launched in Queens less than 15 years ago has allowed more than 50,000 people, city-wide, to be diverted from jail.

“I do this work, and everyone on my team does this work, because it’s a human service,” says De Jesus. “At one of the lowest points in a person’s life, we invite them to ask, what are the challenges I’ve been facing? What are the benefits I could realize by doing things differently? Because of Supervised Release, tens of thousands of New Yorkers have had a chance to reimagine and redirect their lives with the critical support of people who really care.”

2022



2022:

# Data Insights Inform Pretrial Reform

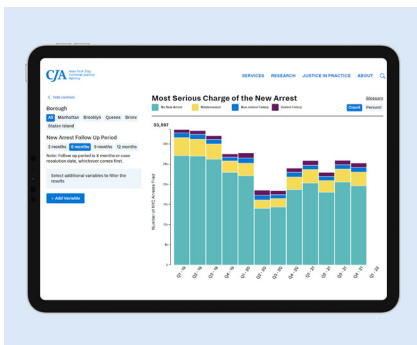
CJA has made educating others about how data can make justice system operations fairer and more effective a core part of its work. It is currently doing this in two ways: using its website to illustrate the valuable influence of data in New York City courts today, and by using its extraordinary data capacity to develop the next generation of reform.

CJA's website seeks to showcase the positive impact data can have on pretrial justice policy and practice. Visitors to the site can learn, for example, about the specific information CJA staff collect in their interviews with recently arrested individuals and how that information is aggregated and weighed to help judges make pretrial release decisions. Visitors even have an opportunity to answer the eight questions that appear on the release assessment to discover

what suggestion a judge would receive if they were to be arrested and arraigned. A score of 19-25 results in a recommendation for Release on Recognizance (ROR) for all eligible charges. Scores ranging from 18 down to 12 may elicit a recommendation for ROR or other options, depending on the charges. A release assessment generating a score of 11 or less would elicit no recommendation for ROR.

The website also has several interactive dashboards focusing on fundamental questions about the city's pretrial justice system that would be impossible to answer but for CJA's singular data capacity. These include, for example, How many people are arrested and prosecuted in New York City each year? (answer: 92,142 in 2022), How many people are arrested and prosecuted five or more times? (answer: 2,586 in 2018 and 2,505 in 2022) and How many people are currently living in the community with a pending court case? (answer: 44,799 in April 2023). Visitors are able to filter the data by borough, charge, and demographics, including arrested individuals' age, gender, race, and ethnicity, to derive more nuanced answers.

"Before CJA began leveraging their data capacity to provide data-driven insights, the average person couldn't answer the most basic questions about the pretrial justice system," says Marie VanNostrand, a nationally recognized expert on criminal justice data who has been part of CJA's work



CJA's Pretrial Release Dashboard, one of several data tools that can be accessed at [www.nycja.org/research](http://www.nycja.org/research)

to make NYC's use of justice system data more transparent and effective. "People knew the number of individuals incarcerated in Rikers Island, but how many people were in the community pending trial remained unknown, primarily due to the complexity of answering that question. You need to know what happened at arrest, at arraignment, if the person was released pretrial, when the case was resolved, etc. The data needed to answer these questions are found in different systems and require complex transformations."

CJA provides a similar service to help the city's policymakers gain a better understanding of how the system itself is operating—something that is critically important for developing the next generation of reform.

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Ongoing changes in the use of money bail provide a good example of how this works.

In 2019 state leaders passed legislation that abolished money bail for many misdemeanors and non-violent felonies. Debate about the new standards flared even before they went into effect. Some continued to push against any use of jail before trial, arguing that judicial decisions are informed by data that may be tainted by historic biases. Others complained that too much emphasis on release could generate more crime.

CJA's suite of Pretrial Data Dashboards have sought to provide a common and trusted set of facts about New York City's pretrial justice process.

CJA, once an upstart agency that had to prove the value of data for individual court decisions, now functions as the central data resource for the entire New York City pretrial system. According to VanNostrand, this centralized capacity, and the invaluable system-wide trust it enjoys, is almost unheard of anywhere else in the nation.

"Police, prosecutors, defenders, courts, the community, journalists, and others have confidence in the accuracy of CJA's data" she explains. "CJA provides a common set of facts that can be used to inform major decisions that, in other jurisdictions, are made with little or no data or, worse, bad data."

Following the implementation of the new bail law in 2020, New York City judges dramatically increased their use of Supervised Release, seeking to provide additional support for people who, prior to the new law, might have remained in jail until their case was resolved. Subsequent revisions to the law have given courts more discretion to detain people before trial. Nevertheless, city officials are scaling up existing borough-based Supervised Release programs to meet



the increased demand. Additional resources will be set aside to launch a new demonstration project. That project, which is still in the planning process, could provide even more support and services specially tailored to reduce recidivism among the very small number of people who, CJA data show, are more likely to commit new offenses if released before trial. If successful, it will have the result of maximizing both pretrial release and public safety.

“Because of CJA, we have access to an essential building block of reform: reliable, detailed, analyzable data” that can help decision makers “develop customized solutions” says Courtney Bryan, the Executive Director of the nonprofit Center for Justice Innovation.

CJA’s ability to collect and analyze data will also let court officials track and monitor the new program’s success in real time. This will help them make changes in the pilot program as soon as they are needed, rather than waiting years to learn if the pilot is working as intended.

Half a century ago, CJA began as a means of operationalizing the Manhattan Bail Project. Today its data capacity is the source of a new generation of demonstration projects that will be based upon established facts. It is an extraordinary transformation. It is also an extraordinary story of ideas, ambition, and success that sets New York City apart from every other jurisdiction.

“Fifty years later [CJA is] still innovating, and they’re innovating at a level that is not happening nationally,” says VanNostrand. “They have more data capability, and they’re sharing more data insights that are accurate, timely, and more meaningful than anyone. That doesn’t exist anywhere else. It just doesn’t. CJA’s data capacity and innovation allows them to do things that no one else can.”

“The positive impact CJA has had on the courts has been immeasurable,” says New York State Chief Administrative Judge Joseph Zayas. “For fifty years, CJA has helped make our criminal justice system fairer for all New Yorkers.”



*CJA Research Staff in the Central Office*

“Since 1973, the Criminal Justice Agency has been a critical partner to the Court System in proposing, analyzing and implementing new criminal justice concepts. The positive impact CJA has had on the Courts has been immeasurable. CJA’s pretrial release assessment, originally piloted in 1973 and still in use today, has helped guide judges’ release decisions at the critical first appearance stage for five decades and resulted in countless accused returning to court on their own rather than from jail. Their research has informed every branch of government on what works and what does not. Their Supervised Release program has been on the vanguard, showing best practices for supporting the accused and ensuring their return to court. For fifty years, CJA has helped make our criminal justice system fairer for all New Yorkers.”

**Judge Joseph Zayas**

New York State Chief Administrative

“The New York City Criminal Justice Agency is an essential partner in our work. They have been at the forefront of reducing pretrial detention through their programming and development of new tools to improve decision-making and fairness. Because of CJA, we have access to an essential building block of reform: reliable, detailed, analyzable data that allows us to understand the challenges and needs of both individuals and systems and develop customized solutions. In addition, by developing and launching innovations—such as the Supervised Release pilot in Queens more than a decade ago—CJA contributes to meaningful changes that improve our communities and make our justice system more humane”

**Courtney Bryan**

Executive Director, Center for Justice Innovation.

“Warmest congratulations to CJA for 50 years of dedicated service to New York City as a strong partner in criminal justice work. CJA is a leader in data driven innovative research strategies that promote fairness and good government solutions in the criminal justice system, while addressing the needs of some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers. We are excited to see how CJA continues to show up for New Yorkers in the next 50 years.”

**Deanna Logan**

Director, Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice

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**Dr. Marie VanNostrand**

Cofounder and Director of Data Analytics, Luminosity, Inc.

“CJA emerged from the Manhattan Bail Project, an experiment launched in 1961 by Vera on the simple premise that a person’s community ties, not money bail, are the real incentive to return to court. It was revolutionary for its time, serving as the catalyst for the federal Bail Reform Act of 1966 and countless other pretrial services programs across the country. Fifty years later, CJA is still a leader in the pretrial justice field. Its data-driven, supportive approach to pretrial supervision is a national model for how to advance both safety and justice. As the fifth president and director of Vera, I am proud to watch it evolve yet remain a core part of the Vera family.”

**Nick Turner**

President and Director, Vera Institute of Justice

## Our Timeline

# 1961

Vera Institute of Justice's Manhattan Bail Project begins. The Manhattan Bail Project, Vera's first initiative, shows that many people accused of committing a crime can be relied on to appear in court and do not have to post bail or be held until trial.

# 1973

The Pretrial Services Agency (PTSA) of the Vera Institute launches a pilot project in Brooklyn to make pretrial release recommendations to judges as an independent nonprofit agency.

# 1976

The Pretrial Services Agency opens in Manhattan. A study conducted on notifications system shows an almost 30% increase in court appearance rates during the earliest court dates.

# 1977

The new system is so successful that PTSA (and by 1977, the newly created Criminal Justice Agency) is given citywide responsibility to provide pretrial services.

# 1980

The Bail Expediting Program (BEX) is first trialed and tested, assisting families in preventing their loved ones from spending unnecessary time in Rikers Island.

# 1988

BEX expands into Queens and the Bronx and adds enhancements including a help desk assisting family and friends present in the court and via phone with pretrial pre- and post arraignment information. An onsite help desk also opens in the Bronx.

## 1995

CJA begins using Palm Pilots /Tablets for performing pretrial interviews, major step towards the use of computer technology.

CJA works with the Division of Criminal Justice Services on a direct feed to collect criminal history data and match with persons arrested and interviewed.

## 1993

The Midtown Community Court works with the Unified Court System, Center for Justice Innovation, and CJA to provide defendant information for the court, along with research data.

## 2003

The Updated CJA Release Assessment is developed after extensive research conducted by CJA's research department. This new assessment results in a more accurate reporting of a defendant's likelihood of returning to court, and recommends more people for release.

## 2009

Working with CJA, the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice pilots Supervised Release in Queens in 2009.

## 2010

BEX expands fully into Brooklyn and Manhattan. Over 1,000 people are diverted from jail in the programs first year.

## 2013

The Supervised Release pilot expands into Manhattan.

## 2016

Supervised Release is launched as a full, city wide program with city funding in June 2016. In its first year 2,402 people are served by Supervised Release citywide.

## 2017

BEX is expanded to include high bail amounts, with more funding from the city and expanded parameters of enrollment. Over 2,000 people are diverted from jail every year under the larger BEX program.

## 2018

CJA launches the Court Appearance Pilot Project (CAPP), a collaborative research effort initiated in 2018 to study how multifaceted interpersonal engagement strategies with individuals released pretrial can help to improve their court appearance rates.

## 2019

The 2003 CJA Release Assessment is phased out, and the updated CJA Release Assessment was put into use in New York City courtrooms.

The new assessment is created in partnership with several organizations and the update process focused on accuracy and transparency. The new assessment recommends approximately 88% of people for release on recognizance.

CJA launches its new website, [www.nycja.org](http://www.nycja.org), showcasing new content and interactive features that paint a broader and more transparent picture of CJA's work.

## 2020

In response to COVID 19 CJA initiates the Wellness Project, sending text messages each day to over 22,000 people awaiting trial. The texts contain COVID-19 information, as well as useful resources including food banks, mental health support, housing assistance, and domestic violence services. Since the launch of the Wellness Project, CJA has sent over 400,000 text messages.

CJA's Queens Supervised Release Program launches the Peer Specialist program. Peer Specialists are certified practitioners who have successfully overcome obstacles such as mental health diagnoses, addiction, involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness, and much more.

## 2021

CJA launches the Pretrial Release Dashboard Project, giving an unprecedented look at the pretrial population of NYC.

## 2022

CJA launches dashboards that explore arrests and rearrests in NYC, allowing readers to explore data about the cases that were filed with the court in New York City for people arrested and released into the community awaiting case disposition.

## 2023

CJA launches a new dashboard that analyzes how many people are arrested and prosecuted in NYC each year, with data that was compiled over a five-year period.

In June of 2023 the NYC Mayor's Office and City Council announces an additional \$36.8 million in the highly successful but over-subscribed Supervised Release Program.



50

YEARS OF

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