



**Mayor Maria Rivera
FY2025 Budget Address**

Good evening, President Ferri, Honorable Members of our City Council, Department Directors and staff, and residents of Central Falls.

It's hard to believe I'm standing before you tonight delivering my fourth budget address in my first term as your mayor.

I'm presenting you with a proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year that I believe prioritizes two of the most important things our city can offer: investments in quality of life and our future.

When I think about building and supporting a city that truly works for its people, it's of course about the big progress and huge strides forward that change the dynamics of our city, like our work to significantly grow our housing stock and chart a new course for education in Central Falls.

But tonight is also about building and supporting a city that focuses on the small things that matter, too – the things that keep our city running smoothly every day and create a better quality of life for every resident, like cleaner, safer streets and outdoor spaces, and making it easier to interact with our city government.

Together with our Departments, we've developed a balanced FY2025 budget that ensures our funds are focused on what matters most to our community today and tomorrow, and is complemented by new federal, state, and outside grant dollars we've won that validate the great work happening here.

A New Chapter for Central Falls Schools

It's no secret that the education we offer our students here in Central Falls must be better. It's no fault of our hardworking teachers, those leading our schools, or our families who want nothing more than the best for their children. It's a bigger system failure we're working hard to finally address. Our schools have been under-resourced for decades – educating our students without the input or investments that support what our teachers and families really need. It's time that finally changes, and the only way forward is together.

That was overwhelmingly clear just a couple of weeks ago when we broke ground on our brand new \$108 million-dollar high school. Hundreds of supporters turned out to celebrate that historic moment of pride. We're finally replacing the 100-year-old deteriorating building our students and teachers have dealt with for far too long. This was a huge step forward for our future, and the culmination of incredibly hard work between our city and school district, state leaders, and organizations that believe in Central Falls. We sent a powerful message to our students that they matter. Our new modern high school will empower them, and give our teachers and school community a better building to support their important work.

But I know a new building alone doesn't solve the education challenges we face.

When I ran for mayor, I knew then I needed to do something bold to help our students. And our families. And our teachers. For so long, our community has been on the receiving end of decisions made without their input or control. The only way to make education work for Central Falls is to ensure the people who live and work here have a voice – and their voices are heard. That's exactly what we're doing.

I raised nearly half a million dollars to launch a new office in our city – the Office of Education Strategy – to do an in-depth analysis of our schools, understand what they truly need to succeed, and support our next steps forward. All of this work started by listening. Our Education Strategy team has listened to hundreds of families, students, teachers, and community members across our city about what's needed in our schools, what's working, and what's not.

I invite you all to join us on Saturday, June 8 at 11:00am in Veterans Memorial Park to hear about what we've learned from this work, new data, and the important steps forward.

As this work happens, we've found additional ways to invest in our students. Our city applied for and won more funding than any other city or town for the Governor's important Learn365 initiative. This has allowed us to launch new programs and invest in proven strategies to boost attendance, FAFSA completion rates, and RICAS scores.

We are truly turning the page and starting a new chapter for our students and families.

More Affordable Homes for Our Residents

When I think about our families – and all the ways our city can better support quality of life for everyone here in Central Falls – we can't ignore the biggest challenge too many families are facing right now: a lack of affordable, stable, safe housing.

I made a bold commitment to bring in 200 new housing units to our city during my term as mayor, and I'm proud to report we are on track to do just that.

As one of the densest cities in America, we've had to get creative to find space and opportunity to develop. Importantly, with a very limited budget, acquiring new properties was a huge challenge. That's why I strongly advocated for the creation of the Site Acquisition Program in the state budget, which has allowed our city to buy properties we never would have been able to acquire otherwise, like the properties across the street. Broad Street Homes – our former police station and old Dunkin Donuts property – will be breaking ground in the coming weeks, which will bring 44 new affordable apartments to our city.

I'm also excited to announce the completion of our new Washington and Hood St developments. Two former vacant lots acquired by the City of Central Falls Redevelopment Agency were transformed into state-of-the-art single-family homes that recently hit the market. Homeownership is a key ingredient for everything from building generational wealth to improving health outcomes. But too often our residents are priced out of the market. Therefore, I directed these new homes be sold below cost via a lottery that prioritized residents, veterans, first-time homebuyers, and those employed by Central Falls-based organizations. Next Monday May 20th at 11:30am, please join us to celebrate two Central Falls families that will realize their dream of homeownership.

And there's so much more being done. Together with Dr. Nelken and Jenks Park Pediatrics, we imagined a new type of housing project that would give women and children – particularly those experiencing huge hurdles like domestic violence or homelessness – a stable, affordable place to live, with wrap-around services that will change their lives, like health care, workforce education, and so much more. Last month, we made this project a reality and officially opened 30 units at Jenks Park Residences.

A quick glance around our city and it's easy to see all of the great housing work happening. Site work just began at 44 Central Street to bring 25 mixed-income rental units and two community-focused commercial units; 23 Central Street is moving forward with 12 mixed-income rental units after receiving Planning and Zoning Board approvals; 58 affordable rental units will be coming to 6 School Street; 18 affordable units will be coming to 28 Cross Street; and nine residential units at 116 Chestnut Street opened less than a year ago. Add in additional market-rate housing we're also focused on – like 106 units on Roosevelt Avenue coming this year; converting the former Broad Street School building to 31 residential units currently underway; 10 residential and two ground-floor commercial units on Sheridan Street; six residential units at Lonsdale Ave and Orchard Street; and plans for construction of six residential units on School Street.

These are all life-changing developments we've invested in and helped facilitate.

Moreover, we're continuing our work to make sure our existing housing stock is safe. We've been focused on expanding our widely-recognized lead-safe efforts that help make homes safer in our city, combating dangerous child lead poisoning. As a result of these efforts, I'm proud to share that since I was sworn in as Mayor, Central Falls has brought nearly 1,000 housing units into compliance. That is nearly 20 percent of all housing units in the city.

I'm incredibly grateful to our hardworking Law Department leading this effort, along with the amazing housing progress championed by our Planning Department, Housing Consultant, and the developers and agencies around our city committed to our work. Let's give them a round of applause.

It's clear – housing is happening here in Central Falls.

Quality of life for our residents goes far beyond home and school. It's about the amazing amenities and support we can offer citywide. Like our outdoor spaces, parks, and even roadways.

We just opened up our amazing new Pierce Park with a baseball field and basketball court, and I love seeing these used every day! Big upgrades are currently underway for Jenks Park – an iconic place in the heart of our city. From a new, expanded playground, to new café tables and seating for families, to significant landscaping improvements, new sidewalks, and more, the first phase of upgrades to our historical park will create an incredible outdoor space for all to enjoy in our city. Phase One work wraps up next month!

We're also celebrating the opening of our new Tennis Courts at Sacred Heart and Phillips Street Diversity Garden very soon. This is going to be a season to remember for our families, and I hope to see more residents inspired to get outdoors and enjoy all the beautiful offerings around our city.

When we consider our outdoor spaces, many of our improvements have had a dual-focus: improving spaces for our residents and our environment at the same time. Pierce Park renovations included elements to support stormwater runoff, and we applied for and won funding to bring new improvements to Dexter Plaza and the nearby area that will not only make it more enjoyable – like our new plans to allow food trucks! – but also help with stormwater runoff and control.

Flooding has been a big issue in our city as we see the effects of climate change. We're making sure we have focused efforts to respond to this. Thanks to FEMA funding, we're working closely with Pawtucket on a joint Hazard Mitigation Plan and we'll be sharing proposed initiatives for consideration by our community and the Council in the coming months.

Prioritizing Safety Citywide

As I think about our environment – particularly our parks and outdoor spaces – one thing we've heard loud and clear is that families and residents have safety concerns in our parks. We've been hearing this for some time, and I'm proud to share that we're taking steps to directly address those concerns. We've invested in over a dozen cameras for all of our parks – being installed by the end of this year. This will be an important tool to keep these beautiful spaces clean, accessible, and most importantly, safe.

Further, this budget expands our award-winning community policing efforts. At the start of my tenure, I hired Colonel Roberson because of his expertise in blending the science of policing with the art of community relations. In ways big and small he is making good on this mission. For instance, several years ago, state funding dried up for our Police Department's summer bike patrols. My proposed budget creates a stable and consistent city-controlled funding source to bring back this important public safety initiative. Starting at the end of this school year, we'll see our approachable, community-centered officers out on bikes and on new walking beats in high-volume areas.

It's no surprise our Police Department's efforts have been recognized internationally. In fact, Central Falls was the first and only police department in our state to be recognized by the International Association of Chiefs of Police for our community policing efforts. And we just got word today that our Department was selected – out of hundreds across the country – to receive the Model Agency Award by the National Association of School Resource Officers.

From our entire Department being the first in the state to be fully trained in nonviolence practices, to unique programs like our nationally-recognized Leading Ladies Initiative that strengthens community trust and collaboration, to our community-focused programs that build trust and rapport with our residents of all ages, to the important work of our Domestic Violence Task Force that's launching more education and prevention efforts

citywide, to officers winning Community Officers of the Year awards for outstanding community policing – we have made huge strides.

Our community-focused policing efforts have been working. Crime is down in our city, and over the last several years of our work, we've seen the lowest violent crime rates in 20 years.

I'm grateful to our Police Department that works so hard to keep us safe. And when I think about safety, our Fire Department plays a huge role in that, too.

We may be the smallest city in Rhode Island, but we're one of the busiest. Responsible for thousands of calls annually, the tremendous responsibility our Fire Department faces every day doesn't go unnoticed. I was so proud to celebrate the new state-of-the-art fire engine we got for our Fire Department this spring, thanks to American Rescue Plan Act dollars invested by our city and a grant we won from the USDA. This new engine will help our first responders continue their life-saving work and keep our community safe.

Investments with Impact

We've continued to find ways to make our streets safer – and work better – for our residents and visitors. This budget funds additional traffic calming measures citywide, including removable speed bumps in high-need areas to slow dangerous speeding. With community input that will give residents a chance to request a traffic evaluation of a specific location, our officials will utilize this feedback and prioritize the areas where these are most needed.

As we invest in safer streets, we need to continue investments in the surrounding infrastructure as well. For too long, there's been deferred maintenance in our city, and it's time we catch back up. One of the ways we're doing that is through sidewalk improvements. With so many pedestrians year-round, I'm looking forward to ramping up a concerted effort this summer to fix our worst sidewalks.

We've chosen to invest our available dollars in ways that make the most impact, focused on quality of life for our community. Even small changes make a big difference. Beyond our sidewalks, we're making investments that keep our city running smoothly, like new a dump truck for our Department of Public Works that will help keep our parks cleaner, make it easier to expand debris cleanup efforts around our city, and improve our snow-removal operation come wintertime.

We've also been looking for ways to make interacting with our city easier. We currently have an antiquated system that requires residents to only use cash or checks for important services, like accessing vital records or obtaining licenses. So many of us rely on the ease of credit cards for all other transactions in our lives, so why not at City Hall? It's time to bring our city government into the 21st century and give our residents the ability to pay online. This budget pilots the start of a new payment system in our Clerk's Office. If successful, we'll be looking to expand this accessibility later this year to places like DPW and Housing Court, too.

A City That Works for Its City

When I was sworn in and created our Office of Constituent Services and Health on day one, I knew we could find ways to not only better reach our residents and support their needs, but become a more customer-friendly city. I made sure this department – and all of our departments – have staff that speak multiple languages and better reflect the people we serve.

With City Hall open for extended hours each month, we're using this time to bring in additional resources that help our residents, and raise awareness about this opportunity. From free immigration and other legal services, to utility bill assistance, and even free health resources, we're continuing this momentum. We're going to bring in resources and support from other departments during extended hours, like a job resource booth for residents who can't meet with our HR department during the day.

This budget also invests in an additional part-time staff member to help elevate this work and impact, bolstering constituent services and the ways we respond to what our residents need. In the absence of a Senior Center, the

Office of Constituent Services and Health will start hosting healthy living programs that will help our older residents stay active and thrive in their everyday lives. Programs will include wellness workshops, fitness classes, healthy cooking demonstrations, and more opportunities for socializing.

But the bedrock of this resident-focused work is our dream of El Centro. We've already raised more than \$7.5 million in outside dollars to fund this project. With construction starting later this year, this one-stop community center is going to be a game-changer for our city. El Centro will elevate the amazing work of our Office of Constituent Services and Health by bringing them to a central location, alongside resource organizations that will respond to the needs of our residents in real time. Complemented by other amenities, from a community space and gymnasium to a food pantry, I can't wait to see the magic of El Centro come to life.

We're investing in a city that truly works for its city.

Better for Businesses

After we took a big step last year to make our city more business-friendly by providing a new \$20,000 exemption on tangible property, I'm proud to share our state recently took this another step forward by raising this exemption to \$50,000.

I've been working to build a city that's more attractive for entrepreneurs to choose Central Falls as a place to open a new business, or re-locate their current one – bringing in more jobs for our residents.

And our work continues to make Central Falls better for businesses. After launching a new position in our city – our first-ever Bilingual Workforce and Small Business Coordinator – we've hosted many workshops, job fairs, and small business-focused events that focus on helping Central Falls be a better city for businesses. This work is continuing in the months ahead, and I'm especially excited for one business-focused event in particular, 2024 Central Falls Restaurant Week!

Community at Center

It's not just Restaurant Week that brings so many of us together. I want to give a special thanks to our hardworking Parks and Recreation Department who organize so many events year-round for our community. When I think of the Central Falls of today, I think of our unforgettable Salsa Nights, our summer programs, 4th of July celebration, movie nights, Food Truck Fest, Car Show, Easter in the Park, Halloween celebration, and so many more events that build a sense of community here.

I'm proud to share that we're able to make these events possible – and free for all – because our team has been hyper-focused on raising outside funds through grants and sponsorships. Just last year, we brought in more than \$115,000 for these events.

They also give opportunities to our families that may not have had these experiences otherwise, like our Thanksgiving and Holiday Food Basket giveaway events, or our free youth kayaking program. This fall, we're even launching a new bike tour initiative that will not only give our families access to a new fun recreational opportunity, but it will intentionally showcase our beautiful outdoor spaces and new bike paths to many.

I never want our families to be unable to experience joys in life or special occasions because they can't afford it. That's why we're going to keep working so hard to prioritize creative ways we can raise funds for this work, and keep building our sense of pride and community. I want to give a huge thanks to our City Fund Developer who truly makes this work possible.

During the course of my first term, we've had huge dreams and priorities. But I also knew our ambitious plans would never be possible without a commitment to fundraising and finding outside support for our amazing community of Central Falls – applying and advocating for grants, sponsorships, state, and federal funds. Through our fund development, we've brought in more than \$166 million dollars to invest in our work, like new school

buildings and education in our city, El Centro, funds for our first responders, new community events, and so much more. I like to think we're just getting started.

Choosing Central Falls and Our Future

Without a doubt, Central Falls is worth investing in. Like so many of you here tonight – we choose Central Falls because it represents more than just our community. Central Falls represents hope, diversity, and a better future.

I've had the privilege to meet many mayors and leaders from communities across our country, and they're always amazed at how such a small city can get so many big things done. I'm truly humbled by the amount of people who reach out about the changing landscape in Central Falls. Honestly, sometimes I'm truly amazed at us, too.

We make progress happen because we aren't afraid of hard work, and we do that hard work together.

I would like to take a moment to truly thank our city department directors and staff. I know we share a deep commitment to this community, and none of this progress would be possible without you. I also want to thank our community partners who have chosen – and continue to choose – Central Falls as a city worth supporting.

Members of the City Council, thank you for your continued work and partnership. I encourage you to pass this proposed FY2025 budget before you that invests in our quality of life and our future.

Let's move Central Falls forward, together.

Juntos!

Thank you.