

**Commissioner Joseph Ponte**  
**Opening Remarks / Graduation**  
**December 2015**  
As prepared for delivery

- Thank you, Mayor, for being here. And thank you for your continued support.
- Families, Friends, and Distinguished Guests – Welcome here today.
- Academy Recruits – Congratulations!
- This is a time of great change for the Department.
  - This is the first time we have put together a comprehensive, long-term plan intended to fix and address all the issues facing this department
  - Before this, there was no long-term strategy -- just reaction.
- Many of you are nervous about that change. That’s okay, because change is hard.
- But, we are at a crossroads.
  - One road is very familiar and the one most have already travelled.
  - The other presents challenges, risks, and unknowns.
- Many are saying we must go backwards, but I say we need to move forward.
- The past, the familiar road, did not give us the results we wanted.
- This is what was being said about us when I walked in – in a Department of Justice Report:

- “a pattern and practice of conduct at Rikers that violates the constitutional rights of adolescent inmates”
- “a deep-seated culture of violence is pervasive”
- “unnecessary and excessive force”
- These were things they said.
- Over a year ago, when I came to the Department, I spent several months:
  - touring every facility
  - holding focus groups with members of service at all levels
  - bringing everyone I could to the table to talk about what the problems were.
- And after looking at where things were, taking the time to think about the big problems, I understood that the need for change
- The need for reform was real – We could not continue down the same path as before
- We developed a comprehensive, long-term plan
- We brought department leaders, outside experts, and the unions all in to look at the plans, to give us input
- And when we pulled those plans together, I brought those plans to the Mayor.
- The Mayor and this Administration have supported us in our plan; they’ve shown:
  - a commitment to this Department
  - a commitment to our reform

- a commitment to YOU, the men and women of this Department.
- The mayor has given us:
  - Money - nearly \$200 Million since I've started
  - Training – unprecedented training for every officer to deal with our challenging populations
  - Resources – tools, cameras, vehicles, canines
  - And More officers – you.
- Thanks to his support and the commitment of our uniform and non-uniform staff we are implementing our 14-point agenda today.
- And let me tell you, we have had growing pains with making such dramatic changes. It is hard and challenging. We experience setbacks. And sometimes, it feels like it isn't moving fast enough.
- But, it is starting to work.
- While no Assault on Staff is ever okay, Assaults on Staff in 2015 are down 11% from last fiscal year.
- Serious injuries to staff are down 14% from last year, and down 44% this quarter from last quarter.
- And where we have really applied multiple parts of our reform:
  - Increased Staffing Ratios
  - More Programs
  - Better Infrastructure.
- We are seeing dramatic returns -- it is starting to have impact.
- We addressed tough populations.

- mentally ill in CAPS and PACE
  - shot callers and our most dangerous inmates in ESH
  - high classification populations in our Model Facilities at GMDC then GRVC.
- In these units, we've housed over 1500 inmates, and in that time, we've seen:
    - One slashing
    - Only 6 UOF A's
    - far fewer incidents of any kind when compared to the rest of the Department –
      - Uses of Force
      - Inmate Fights
      - Assaults on Staff.
- We ended punitive seg for our adolescents, and violence did not go up.
    - Since I started Assaults on Staff at RNDC have dropped 32%
    - And UOF have dropped by 5%
- And I say we, because this isn't just about me, or Department leadership, or even the Mayor. We all play a part, but it is really about YOU and people like you, who work in the jails everyday. Without you, we don't get any of this done.
- These, amongst thousands of others, are the high quality members of service you all join today.
- Now, let me read from you the Oath you took:
    - Honesty, Loyalty, and Integrity, these are my values.
    - I will always hold myself accountable for having the courage to do what is right.
    - It is with dignity, respect, and the utmost professionalism that I will perform my duties.

- This is your commitment, a commitment to do things the right way.
- That is what we want to do here
  - Do things the right way,
  - Change and transform this agency.
  - Return it to its place as the premier correctional department in the country.
- That requires you to be a part of the Department's reform efforts, it's change.
- And by taking your oath today, accepting that challenge, being a part of that change -- you truly become one of New York's Boldest.
- Congratulations again.