



The following Op-Ed by Commissioner Joe Ponte appeared in the
New York Daily News on August 25th 2015:

JOSEPH PONTE: RIKERS REFORMS ARE TAKING ROOT

BY JOSEPH PONTE

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When I took the job of city correction commissioner last year, no one said that it would be easy to reform the long-abused and oft-neglected department.

Violence has been rising for many years. This has roots in gang tension in our streets and in the growing prevalence of small, hard-to-detect blades and razors that have been smuggled into the jails. Last month, we had 22 slashings and one stabbing, with many of the incidents gang-related.

Yet we are doing everything possible to stop the violence. And in the areas where we have put our new models in place, violence has dropped. In the young-adult facility, where we ended punitive segregation (what the public calls “solitary confinement”) and increased the officer-to-inmate ratio, we had zero stabbings or slashings last month.

In the housing units where we rolled out our new classification tool to more effectively sort and house the most violent, we had zero stabbings or slashings last month. And in our new enhanced supervision housing where we house some of the island’s most violent inmates, we have had zero stabbings or slashings since these units opened in February.

I have spent more than 40 years in the corrections field fixing jails all over the country, and I can say with confidence that our reforms are working. We are focusing on our staff, giving them the tools, the training and the support necessary to deal with this issue. This month, we swore in 600 new officers — the largest class in Correction Department history — which will help bring down inmate-to-staff ratios.

We have a multipronged approach to stopping the bloodshed in our jails. The first is keeping weapons, drugs and other contraband that drive the violence out of our facilities — the backbone of our effort to promote a culture of safety at the department.

To do this, we’ve toughened searches at our front entrances. We began deploying roving K-9s at the gates, using hand-held metal detectors for more in-depth searches, pat-frisking if further search is necessary and limiting the items we allow people to take inside.

We’ve trained 100% of existing front-entrance staff in enhanced Transportation Security Administration-style procedures and added hundreds of security cameras. By the end of 2016, we will have expanded camera coverage to all of Rikers Island.

Monday’s Daily News front page about the paper’s supposed “ban” in the jails Sunday was a misreading of what occurred. We reserve the right to screen and restrict any written material that may compromise the safety and security of staff and inmates, such as coverage that names the locations where violence occurred.

Are our reforms working? Yes. Seizures of drug contraband associated with visits are up 19% during the past seven months compared with the same period in 2014. And we’re not stopping here.

This March, the Correction Department announced we are seeking to amend the Board of Correction's minimum standards to employ a stricter visitation policy. Under our new policy, visitors could register in advance and be screened, we could limit physical contact and hold visits at a table with a 6-inch high plexiglass partition — all so that suspicious movements are easier to detect. These policies would bring the department closer into line with other large jail systems like those in L.A., Chicago and Philadelphia.

Another prong is to root out the contraband that's made it inside. For that, we now frequently conduct tactical search operations and collect intelligence on who might be hiding what where. When we have to, we lock down the facilities when we need to investigate incidents, for intelligence efforts and to forestall violence.

Moreover, we've significantly stepped up our intelligence efforts to stop hits by gangs and others, with unprecedented co-ordination with the NYPD gang intel unit and district attorneys.

Finally, we are preventing the violence by separating the combatants. In February, we started putting some of our most violence-prone inmates into the enhanced supervision housing. While living in these units, those inmates do not circulate in the facility, where they can cause havoc. All services come to them. We have 100 beds of this housing, which were 63% occupied this week, and more are coming online soon.

In May, we began rolling out a new housing classification tool that aims to identify and prevent violence from the moment an inmate steps into our jail — rather than reacting once an incident has already occurred. For the first time, the Correction Department is working with NYPD to look at an inmate's history, including gang affiliation, to house them in the safest way possible.

Meaningful reform takes time, and we are confident that our widespread reforms are leading to safer jails for our staff and inmates alike.

Ponte is the city's correction commissioner.