



The following Op-Ed by Commissioner Joe Ponte appeared in the New York Daily News on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015:

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## **Joseph Ponte: No going back on Rikers reforms** *BY JOSEPH PONTE*

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*Friday, November 13, 2015*

Last week, a city correction officer suffered a horrific attack at the hands of two inmates. For far too long, we have seen violent incidents occur on Rikers Island with alarming frequency. This is precisely the problem I pledged to fix when the mayor appointed me.

Yet in recent days, we have heard the very voices that condemn violence at Rikers — including some labor and advocate voices — argue that safety requires that we scale back our reforms. They claim that violent incidents are occurring because we are aggressively making changes at the Department of Correction.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the safety of our officers and inmates, and the reforms we are bringing to the department, go hand-in-hand. Our 14-point Anti-Violence Agenda is aimed squarely at making staff and inmates safer, including providing safer housing for our most violent inmates, giving inmates constructive alternatives to

violence and improving de-escalation and crisis management training. We must fully implement and build on our reforms if we want to make our facilities safer for the long term.

Before this administration, less than 20% of the department's facilities were monitored by cameras. Under our watch, we have almost doubled cameras to deter and respond quickly to violence. We will have 100% coverage by the end of next year.

Before, officers were given little hands-on or specialized training. Now, we are giving officers more training to defuse tense situations and new training to address mentally ill and adolescent populations.

And we've graduated the largest recruit classes in recent memory; that puts less pressure on officers through better staffing and less overtime.

Before, an outdated use-of-force policy didn't provide sufficient guidance to staff about the actions they could take to ensure their own safety and that of inmates. Under our watch, we have laid out a common-sense policy so officers and inmates clearly understand when and how staff may use force if necessary. As always, staff are empowered to take appropriate steps to protect themselves, their co-workers and the inmates in their care.

Before, hundreds of teenage inmates were locked in punitive segregation for months on end — a form of punishment that can have long-lasting, negative effects on the developing adolescent brain. We are ending punitive segregation for inmates 21 and younger. And in the alternative housing units we've built for these inmates, violence remains down.

These reforms are aimed at keeping both our officers and inmates safe — and they are working.

In the housing units we've opened, where inmates are sorted by our new housing tool, offered educational programming and properly staffed with

newly trained officers, we have had zero stabbings or slashings since the units opened.

In the adolescent facility, where we ended punitive segregation in December and put in place safe alternatives, we've seen uses of force decline this year.

Across the department, we've seen the most severe uses of force — those that result in serious injuries to staff and inmates — drop by 22% this year compared to last .

A rollback of these and other reforms would only return us to the practices that allowed for years of rampant violence.

As a former correction officer with years of experience working in jails around the country, I understand the feelings of fear and frustration caused by vicious attacks on officers and inmates. These attacks are unacceptable — and I am firmly committed to working with our uniformed and civilian staff to address the conditions that lead to violence.

But we cannot keep our staff and inmates safe unless we press forward with the changes needed to bring our long-neglected department into the 21st century. After years of horrific stories of violence and neglect emerging from Rikers, walking back from reform is not an option.

*Ponte is New York City correction commissioner.*