

PRESS
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The New York City Department of Correction

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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DOC Settles Hart Island Cemetery Lawsuit

Historic Agreement Widens Access to Gravesites for Family Members While Ensuring Safety

EAST ELMHURST, N.Y. -- Commissioner Joe Ponte today announced that the New York City Department of Correction (DOC) has settled a class-action lawsuit brought by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) on behalf of family members of individuals interred on Hart Island, the city's mass burial ground for indigents. Under the terms of the settlement, DOC will now permit monthly gravesite visits on Hart Island by family members and their guests, in addition to its pre-existing practice of permitting monthly visits by the public to a memorial area on the Island at a distance from the gravesites.

“The parties to this settlement share a common goal: We want to enable access to the cemetery on Hart Island in a compassionate and safe manner,” **Commissioner Ponte** said. “We look forward to implementing this historic settlement, and pledge to work closely with the NYCLU in order to make the compassionate access it envisions a reality.”

The Department of Correction has administered the city cemetery on Hart Island since the 19th century and considers the duty a solemn responsibility.

In recent years, DOC has conducted regular monthly visits, always on a weekday, in order to allow family members and others to pay their respects. The visits take place at a space called the Gazebo, which overlooks the cemetery. DOC supervises the maintenance of the island, where inmates work the grounds and dig the graves.

Under the terms of the settlement, DOC will:

- provide individuals with access to the gravesites of family members on one weekend day per month
- escort those visitors in order to ensure their safety
- maintain an online and telephone system through which family members may schedule gravesite visits and
- add burial plot numbers to the online database DOC maintains on those interred at Hart Island, in order to facilitate visits.

The new weekend gravesite visitation policy applies only to family members of those interred and individuals those family members may invite to accompany them. All others may make monthly visits to the Gazebo on the regular weekday visiting day, as usual. DOC purchased additional grounds-keeping equipment and has assigned additional personnel in order to accommodate the gravesite visits safely. The terms of the settlement are effective immediately.

Hart Island lies in Long Island Sound, off The Bronx.

About the New York City Department of Correction

The New York City Department of Correction (DOC) manages the jail system for New York City. It operates Rikers Island, which houses 10 individual facilities, four borough-based jails and two hospital wards, as well as court facilities in all five boroughs. In FY 2014, DOC had 77,141 admissions involving 56,218 individuals.

Its Average Daily Population is approximately 11,400, over 80 percent of whom are housed on Rikers Island. Most of the inmates in DOC custody are being detained pending the resolution of charges against them; approximately 15 percent are city-sentenced inmates who are serving sentences of one year or less. For more information, visit www.nyc.gov/doc.

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