

The following Op-Ed by Commissioner Joe Ponte appeared in the
Staten Island Advance on August 5th, 2016:

Joseph Ponte: Reforms are making our jails safer

BY JOSEPH PONTE

Friday, August 5th, 2016

When Mayor de Blasio and I set out in 2014 to create a culture of safety at the Department of Correction, we knew that meaningful reform would take time. The department was suffering from years of neglect, and violence at Rikers Island and our borough facilities had been rising for years.

Now, however, we are seeing dramatic results: In the first six months of 2016, serious uses of force and serious assaults on staff have dropped by about half when compared to the same period in 2015. Moreover, the drop comes at the same time that we have reduced punitive segregation across the department by three-quarters, by abolishing it for inmates ages 16-18, and capping maximum sentences for older inmates.

While no assault on our officers or other staff is ever acceptable, we can say with confidence that a culture of safety is taking hold.

The decline in violence comes for several reasons, but a big part is the exemplary work of our officers. Nearly 2,000 new correction officers, or about 22 percent of the total officer corps, have completed new training in de-escalation techniques – which help head off potential incidents. Our new Use of Force policy gives clear guidance for when force is appropriate. The efforts of our dedicated, hardworking staff have been key.

Changes in the jails reinforce the changes in training and policy. Steady posts in many housing areas have given officers a sense of ownership and empowerment in their work. Knowing the individuals in their care and custody allows officers to make smart decisions.

In addition, the City has made nearly \$200 million in investments on officer safety -- our top priority. These include 100 percent camera coverage of Rikers Island by the end of 2016, hiring more officers,

special training for working with special populations such as the mentally ill and adolescents, and stronger management tools to classify and safely house inmates. We are training officers in state-of-the-art defensive tactics and placing emergency response teams in each facility so they can respond faster if officers are in danger. Because safe officers means safer jails.

Our model facilities, especially our first model facility, the 800-bed George R. Vierno Center, called "the Beacon," show how our reforms bring results. We have made infrastructure upgrades in housing areas, rehoused inmates using the Housing Unit Builder to sort them more safely and increased educational and vocational classes to offer up to five hours daily. Critically, we steady the staff and put more in where necessary.

The effect of the reforms in these areas has already been remarkable, in both violence reduction and staff satisfaction. By transforming our jails, we are transforming lives. There have been no slashings and stabbings in the Beacon units, and every violence indicator is trending downward: Uses of Force resulting in serious injury fell 17% from January through June, those with minor injury fell 2%, while total Uses of Force fell 7%. Inmate Assaults on Staff resulting in serious injury fell 25%, Inmate Assaults on Staff resulting in minor injury fell 9%, and total Inmate Assaults on Staff fell 8%. Inmate fights dropped 49%, while serious injuries to inmates from assaults and fights fell 20%.

Today, when walking through the Beacon units, one sees calm, bright, orderly housing areas with staff and inmate cooperation; inmates learning work and life skills in daily and weekend vocational classes. In late April 2016, the Anna M. Kross Center, our largest jail with 2,000 inmates, became the second model facility. We are rolling out the reforms across the department.

We are especially proud of the transformation we have brought to the care and custody of special populations. Instead of punitive segregation, younger inmates who commit violent infractions now spend time in therapeutically oriented, non-punitive housing: Transitional Restoration Unit and Second Chance Housing Units. We plan to safely end punitive segregation for 18-21 year-olds by the end of the year, using similar alternatives. We would be the first jurisdiction in America to do so.

Persistently violent adult inmates, such as those who have slashed or stabbed others, may be placed in Enhanced Supervision Housing, where programming, enhanced staffing, and an incentive system enables their eventual safe return to the general population. There have been few serious incidents of violence in Enhanced Supervision housing since it opened in February 2015.

We have created therapeutically oriented housing to serve the seriously mentally population. We are expanding on this successful model and will be building even more such units over the next few years.

Inmates in these housing units are involved in fewer force incidents and show lower rates of self-harm than similar inmates in other housing.

We have much more work to do, and the city is committed to doing even more going forward. But we are confident that, if we stay the course, New York City will reclaim its rightful place as a national leader in the correctional field. The remarkable drop in violence we have already seen is a sure sign we are on the way.