

The following Op-Ed by Commissioner Joe Ponte appeared in the  
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## A SAFER RIKERS FOR INMATES AND GUARDS THE BOARD OF CORRECTION MUST EMBRACE A PLAN FOR REAL CHANGE

BY JOSEPH PONTE

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When I took the job to lead the NYC Department of Correction last spring, I found that decades of neglect and failed initiatives had produced unacceptable conditions on Rikers Island, including alarming rates of violence against staff and inmates. I immediately began making substantive changes where we could.

But what the department needed was a system-wide reform plan, and after months of review and planning, we now have one.

At the heart of our plan is Enhanced Supervision Housing (ESH), a non-punitive but highly secure housing unit for the small number of dangerous inmates, some 7% of the population, who perpetrate most of the violence in our jails — inmates who, for example, have slashed, stabbed or assaulted someone while in custody.

Mayor de Blasio and the City Council have already funded ESH. However, the Board of Correction, the department's oversight agency, must approve some simple rules changes for us to proceed. I urge the board to do so when it is scheduled to vote on the measure on Jan. 13.

Current Board rules limit how we can respond to inmates who commit infractions. Either they're placed in punitive segregation — removing them from contact with others for up to 23 hours a day — or they stay in the general population.

This has led to an over-use of punitive segregation for low-level infractions. It has also resulted in a dangerous backlog of inmates with serious infractions who are still living in the general population while they await punitive-segregation beds.

The new option, ESH, will help us manage the most dangerous inmates more effectively. It will have more staff per inmate and minimal need to escort inmates around facilities because mandated services, such as chaplains, health services and a law library, will be provided in the unit.

Moreover, ESH will enable other punitive-segregation reforms, such as reducing punitive-segregation sentences to 30 days, from 90 days, per infraction.

It is the cornerstone of our ability to contain the risk posed by violence-prone inmates, without which many other planned changes would be neither safe nor practical.

There are those who argue that ESH is another form of punitive segregation. Nothing could be further from the truth. ESH is not punitive; it is designed to prevent rules violations, not to respond to them. Neither does it resemble punitive segregation, in which inmates are allowed out of their cells only one hour a day, for exercise. Inmates in ESH will have at least seven hours out of their cells a day, during which they will interact with staff and other inmates. Housing similar to ESH has long been used in other states, and is considered a sound practice by experts in the field.

This will enable us to house the most violence-prone inmates in the least restrictive environment while helping us to ensure the safety of the general inmate population. In this way, it represents a signal expansion of inmates' rights, especially their foremost right — the right to be safe and secure in their persons while in custody.

Piece by piece, we are assembling a broad agenda that will transform Rikers into a safer place for staff and inmates alike. In December, we ended punitive segregation for adolescents. We've instituted more appropriate housing and better care for mentally ill inmates and developmentally appropriate custody management for younger inmates. We've revamped recruiting and training, with an eye toward retaining the highest caliber staff. We have moved lock-in to 9 p.m. from 11 p.m. and tightened security at facility entrances.

We now stand at a crossroads. The Board of Correction can approve the rules changes and allow Mayor de Blasio's agenda of meaningful reforms to move forward. Or it can vote for the failed status quo. Let's hope it makes the right decision.

*Ponte is New York City correction commissioner.*