

My name is Mark Cranston, and I am the Warden of the Middlesex County Jail in New Jersey. I was formerly First Deputy Commissioner at Rikers and served in the agency for 25 years.

I stand before you today as an advisor to President Elias Husamudeen and the over 8,000 men and women of COBA, and it is my honor to speak before you today on their behalf.

I want to start off by congratulating everyone in this room for their role in moving forward a progressive agenda to reduce recidivism, improve conditions of confinement and reduce the number of mentally ill patients who are warehoused in jails.

I come here today understanding and agreeing with where you want to go. However, I know that in order to achieve great things, you must have a strong foundation to stand on, and Rikers does not have that foundation.

Given this harsh reality, why is it the priority of this board and the administration to be the first in the nation to eliminate punitive segregation for 19-21 year olds?

As Commissioner Ponte recently stated in an Our Time Press interview— ***“no one in the country’s even trying this, they are reducing their reliance but no one’s saying I’m going to eliminate it”***— well I submit to this board that maybe that’s for good reason. It seems to me that all the other correction experts in the country have figured out that eliminating it probably isn’t a good idea.

Using it only when absolutely necessary, in the least restrictive manner possible and for the shortest duration possible – these are the cornerstones of the recent guidelines put forth by the US Justice Department and I believe this should be our near term strategy as we rebuild the foundation necessary to operate a safe jail system. Only then can we reach beyond these guidelines and lead the nation.

If we continue down the current path, it would seem that you're more interested in touting that we are first in something than you are at creating safe jails. We must pay attention to the data, its definitive. We shouldn't be gambling with people's lives just so this board and administration can claim to have a nation-leading strategy, **because strategies are irrelevant when you have no hope of successfully implementing them.**

What this Board is doing, while well intentioned, is trying to drive a car that has two flat tires and no gas, and insisting the goal is to win the Indy 500. As an outsider, it is easy to see why that is happening, because while each of you has expertise in your own domain, not one of you ever served as a Correction Officer. How ludicrous would it be to have an oversight body over a hospital that did not have a single doctor or nurse on it? Therefore, we are asking this board to consider requiring that amongst its members there is at least one member who has significant uniformed corrections experience and at least one member who was formerly incarcerated so that you can ensure you have the full spectrum of expertise and experience to carry out this important work.

COBA will no longer sit idly by and hope you can work this out sensibly with the administration. We are not a roadblock to reform but you are putting the cart before the horse, because many of the things you've fixated on and are about to implement are contrary to immediate safety.

Folks, the problems faced by Rikers are completely solvable. There are examples around the nation of jails and prisons safely reducing the use of segregation. At Middlesex County, working in collaboration with the Vera Institute of Justice, we reduced punitive segregation from 7% of our ADP to 2%. We did this as a collective commitment at the jail and in an effort to **never let a 3rd party or outside body dictate how it would be done.** We worked collectively with advocates, custody and medical staff to make sure we had a fundamental understanding of their concerns so as to avoid any potential unintended consequences of what we were contemplating – and then we implemented it incrementally so as to ensure a safe and orderly transition.

COBA is ready to provide its expertise and to jointly plan and enact reform. We are on board. But this must be done in a coordinated fashion, with clear focus on the foundational elements required. Stop thinking of us as a hindrance and instead, inject our expertise into the process.

I will contact each of you to meet with you and share the officers perspective and to provide you with alternative solutions as you deliberate these important issues. I encourage you to embrace the new stance COBA is taking and to never forget that if you fail to build the foundation, your gains will be illusions, only to fall apart like a house of cards at the slightest gust. Our inmates and staff deserve better, and it is the only way to ensure we actually make the progress we all so badly desire.