

Statement before the
New York City Council
Committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services

Elizabeth Crowley, Chairperson

By Joseph Ponte, Commissioner

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Good afternoon, Chairperson Crowley and members of the committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services. I am Joseph Ponte, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction.

As Commissioner, I am committed to advancing comprehensive reforms that will positively affect the Department by combating violence and fundamentally shift our institution to a culture of safety. Since December, Use of Force incidents have dropped significantly at both RNDC and GRVC. At RNDC, Uses of Forces have decreased by 39%. At GRVC, Uses of Force have decreased by 50%. We have made progress in many areas, closing adolescent punitive segregation, creating the Rikers Rovers canine program at RNDC and opening Enhanced Supervision Housing units, but much more continues to be accomplished. While I spoke to you about our comprehensive, 14-point anti-violence reform agenda in March, I would like to take this opportunity to update you on this critical reform effort.

There are five initiatives that directly target violence and nine cultural transformational efforts. To address the violence that has plagued the jails for far too long, we are taking a holistic approach. This approach will:

- keep contraband off Rikers Island;
- establish an integrated classification and housing strategy;
- provide complete camera coverage on the island;

- expand educational and programming opportunities for inmates; and,
- designate specially trained first responders for rapid de-escalation.

I would like to take a moment to briefly discuss each of these initiatives and how, collectively, they will reduce violence and promote a culture of safety.

1. DOC needs to keep weapons, drugs, and contraband out of Rikers

We must confiscate weapons, drugs, and other dangerous contraband before it makes its way onto Rikers Island. Contraband of any kind increases the likelihood of violence. To that end, DOC will enhance our overall search procedures at the front gate of the facilities. This will include enhanced efforts to ensure contraband is not being moved by staff, inmates, or visitors. At the front gate, all staff will receive TSA-style search training and conduct K-9 searches of all individuals entering the Island. Investigator teams will be placed at key facilities. To date, investigator teams have been placed in three facilities and going forward will be located in key high population facilities. And, at the facility level, we will use the best search equipment available to conduct searches. We are seeking state legislative action to allow for the use of body-scanning capability to detect the most dangerous weapon in the facilities: scalpels. Locker rooms will also be relocated outside of the facilities, so that staff and visitors will have a place to store items. In addition to these security procedures already under way, DOC is seeking modest revision of the NYC Board of Correction's minimum standards on visitation to allow for changes that will enhance safety for all.

2. DOC will create an integrated classification and housing strategy

We will finalize a new system for classifying and housing inmates to more effectively identify those inmates who are most likely to commit violent acts and separate them from those that are less likely to do so. By adopting a new classification and housing strategy, the Department will address the unique needs of the inmate population. As part of this new system, we will assess and improve both housing assignments and inmate movement. We will be launching an integrated classification and housing pilot at a designated facility in order to evaluate the initial plan before expanding it by implementing it facility by facility with appropriate programming and staff.

3. DOC is ensuring comprehensive security-camera coverage across Rikers

We have already begun installing cameras needed to provide 100% coverage on Rikers. Enhanced camera coverage throughout the facilities ensures greater transparency, bolsters forensic records for investigative and training purposes, and provides safety and accountability to all. We are committed to first completing camera coverage in priority facilities with particular attention to adolescent and young-adult housing areas, where we are focusing on a facility-by-facility approach.

4. DOC will design and offer effective inmate education opportunities and services

Reducing idle time has been recognized as a proven method for reducing violence. When inmates are involved in educational and rehabilitative programming, it serves to both reduce their likelihood of engaging in violent acts (by reducing idleness) and supports their development and re-integration into the community. DOC will institute a comprehensive idleness-reduction program that will dramatically expand the options available to all inmates for non-school classes and activities. A robust adolescent and young-adult behavior-modification strategy has been developed and will be implemented in the coming year. Weekend programming enhancements have already begun for the adolescents, a first of its kind at DOC. The goal is to first provide at least 5 hours of available programming to the adolescent and young-adult population before moving on to the adult population.

5. DOC will redefine first-line incident responses

DOC is changing how first-line incident responses are conducted within the Department. First, with funding from the Mayor's Task Force for Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice, DOC and its partners at DOHMH will implement Crisis Intervention Teams later this year. These multidisciplinary teams of specially trained officers, supervisors, mental health staff and nurses will respond to inmates in mental-health crisis to safely and non-violently de-escalate the situation and remove the inmate to the appropriate location for continued treatment. Under our new plan, officers will also be placed in key facilities to ensure rapid response, swift resolution of violent incidents and minimize any chance of escalation or collateral violence. DOC will increase the effectiveness of the Emergency Services Unit (ESU) by overhauling response procedures, tactical equipment, and physical location of staff from a central headquarters to

individual facilities. We will develop measurements to qualify ESU performance (e.g. time from incident start to control) and evaluate execution. Our efforts will reduce overall violence by improving intelligence, raise capabilities and skills for our first-responders, lessen response times to incidents and reduce the collateral damage of violence that occurs.

Nine other initiatives will drive DOC's cultural transformation. Through this combination of initiatives, DOC will create and expand common-sense managerial and operational practices to strengthen performance, accountability, ownership, and transparency. Changing the culture begins at the top, through leadership training geared toward enhanced communication and team-building. Throughout the year, we've listened to staff express their views about the Department. We held four (4) Town Halls and twenty-five (25) focus groups, communicating with over 1200 uniform and non-uniform members of staff about various matters including our antiviolence agenda. By listening to staff, we were able to align the needs of staff with our anti-violence reform agenda. This resulted in a focused plan that we have already begun implementing.

We will ensure a steady flow of top-quality recruits who will be trained and mentored into top-quality officers. Targeted, customized training will be given to officers based on their post designation. Officers working with special populations will have the skills needed to address the scope of their work. Further enhancements will be made through the advancement of an operational-management process to track metrics across divisions and facilities. Through that, we will hold staff accountable for actions they commit and measure their improvements. This plan represents the Administration's continued commitment to holistical reform of Rikers Island after decades of neglect, in order to reduce violence and improve safety in the jails.

Council Legislation

I want to speak briefly about the 12 bills recently introduced by the Council. The theme of these bills is greater transparency: 10 require regular reporting and two require the publication of policies on our website.

I share the Council's appreciation for transparency. As the Department has enacted reforms over the last year, we have tried to be open with the Council and the public about our changes and this has been supported by our efforts to open up the jails to greater numbers of visits from press and interested parties. We are working to make our jails safe for staff, inmates, and visitors, and we

invite the public to pay attention to how we are doing it. While I believe there is some work to be done to the draft bills to clarify definitions and goals, and we do have some concerns about the time and resource burden that some of this reporting would put on our staff, I look forward to working with the Council in the coming months in order to design reports that support the Department's and the Council's shared goals

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I am happy for the opportunity to elaborate on previous discussions about our anti-violence initiatives and the direction in which we are taking the Department. We are making significant improvements, and we will continue to enact important reforms.

At this point, I'd be happy to take your questions.