

Members of the Board of Correction
New York City Board of Correction
51 Chambers Street, Room 923
New York, NY 10007

NYC BOARD OF CORRECTION
MAY 8 '07 AM 10:12

Re: Proposed Amendments to the Minimum Standards

Dear Chairwoman Simmons and Mr. Wolf:

My name is Keith Huling and I am 43 years old. Starting at age 38 I went through Rikers several times for misdemeanors, staying in city jails for a total of 20 months. I also served 21 months at Sing Sing for a felony. I want to describe my experiences at Rikers Island so you are aware of how your proposed changes might affect inmates in circumstances similar to mine.

Safety and Mental Health Treatment

In making the changes to dorms, please be aware that people with mental health issues are particularly vulnerable in large group settings.

Even though I have mental illness, the staff at Rikers did not help me to see someone (a doctor or therapist) more regularly. They would not give me the medication I had been taking on the outside. Sometimes I took the medication they administered to me but it made me sleepy all day. So I stopped taking the medication because I was not fully aware but then without medication I was not fully aware either.

I have been in C-95 where they put people with mental illness and addicted people. All my times at Rikers I have been mistreated by the prisoners. I moved around a lot. I only lasted in a dorm a couple of days because I wasn't going to let people do things to me. I knew I had to fight. Fights were 15-20 people against me. Officers finally came in to break it up and move me into another dorm. It might happen again until they moved me into the cell area.

Food

It could have been paranoia, but they need to answer for the food they serve at Rikers. The coffee in the morning tastes like someone has urinated in it. Things need to be more closely monitored.

Clothing

I could wear my street clothes while I was at Rikers, but I did not feel like it gave me more rights. I was not at Rikers to be pacified or lollygagged and I understood it was not a game, it's your life. Uniforms might get people in order, maybe it is a better way to let people know this is real. It might also stop some fighting—if a guy has a pair of Jordans or a long chain, they are going to take it. Maybe sell it back to him. That's the way the kids are.

If you are going to take something away from people, you have to give something back. It's true that people have to want it, but put programs in place: education, trade skills. People might wake up. When I was at Sing Sing, I had to take CASAT (substance abuse treatment), I learned carpentry and started to get my certificate from the prison ministry there.

Telephone and mail surveillance

I feel that it is a violation to monitor all communications inside the jails for whatever reason but this is happening all over. Everything changed after September 11, what the Constitution represents. I question how these proposed changes are going to work, what the Board or DOC are looking to do or prove. The biggest problem is that people who are participating in the communication, inmates and their family and friends, don't know about these changes. If rights are being taken away and there are privacy issues, families need to know.

Programs

As far as showing people how to be different, jails need to give people tasks. What they give are not real jobs...sweeping floors are not real. Let me build, use a saw, do some painting, do some buffing. A lot of people don't know what is available in the world and that would open the door.

Please consider how jail conditions actually affect people and consider balancing the rights you are taking away with added programs that will help people break people out of the jail cycle.

Sincerely,

Keith C. Huling

Keith Huling

Interviewed on 4/9/2007 by Alison Brill: Cardozo School of Law