

Dear BOC Members,

My name is Robert Mejías and I am 50 years old. I was in Rikers Island from January 2005 to May 2005 as a detainee, and after being sentenced in May, served my time there until April 2006. I also spent 6-8 months in Rikers in 1998.

I think it is a very bad idea for the BOC to get rid of the standard requiring Spanish speaking employees. There already weren't enough Spanish speaking guards and other employees. I speak fluent English and Spanish, so it wasn't a problem for me. But there are a lot of recent immigrants in the jails, especially people from Mexico and Latin America, who don't speak any English. I saw them have a very hard time. I and other inmates tried to translate for them, but we couldn't help everyone and a lot of times there were still big problems. There were several incidents where I saw non-English speakers get violations for failing to obey orders because they didn't understand what the guards were saying to them. I saw one Spanish speaking guy get one because he didn't understand when the guard told him in English to put his mattress through a scanner during a dorm search. Other times I saw people get in trouble for being in the wrong count line – the inmates weren't trying to cause trouble, they just didn't understand the orders at all because of the language difference.

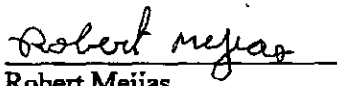
It was also a huge problem that there were never any Spanish speaking doctors. You would have to wait the whole day to see a doctor, and since the doctors didn't speak Spanish and the inmates who didn't speak English would have to get other inmates to translate for them, they would often have to wait even longer until a Spanish speaking inmate came into the waiting room who could translate. I translated for people several times at the doctor, and a few times it was very uncomfortable because the non-English

speaking inmate had to share very private information with me so they could talk to a doctor. It was especially uncomfortable when I had to translate for someone who had HIV.

There was also no chance for the Spanish speakers to watch Spanish language TV, so they never saw the news or other programs they could understand. The guards always favored the English speakers over the non-English speakers, and never made sure that there would be some time for people who only spoke Spanish to watch TV. In general, there was a lot of prejudice on the part of the guards against the Hispanics who couldn't speak English.

I also think that the changes the BOC wants to make to the crowding standard is ridiculous. It is already too crowded and it is not safe. The change will make a lot of problems worse. I saw many people fight just because of space issues. People would back into each other on accident and a fight would start. There was also a lot of theft that the guards never stopped. I worked in intake for 10 cents per hour and would use that money to buy coffee and food. Many times, I would come back from work and find that my stuff had been stolen. It was awful to work so hard for so little and then the little bit you have is stolen. That will get worse with more people packed in the dorm. It will also make the shake down searches even more unbearable. Those caused a lot of tensions, because the guards would come in and mess up and damage your stuff, and all the inmates would be packed together in the day room while they did the searches. People have poor hygiene in the jails and smell bad, and it is awful to be packed so close together with them. There was also never any hot water when you wanted to shower.

The BOC needs to address a lot of other problems. The law library was often inaccessible and the books were really outdated. There was also no Spanish language books. The people who didn't speak English couldn't do anything to help themselves on their cases. The food was also horrible and very starchy. Lots of times we were hungry, and wouldn't get to eat dinner until late at night.



Robert Mejias

Interviewed by Olga Akselrod on April 9, 2007