

hand-deld'd of
hearing 4/17/07

April 10, 2007

Dear Board of Correction:

My name is Jacqueline Velez. The proposed amendments to the Minimum Standards will make conditions at Rikers Island worse rather than better. Instead of decreasing the DOC's requirements, the Board should enforce the standards that are already in place, and focus on improving conditions. My position is informed by on my own experiences at Rikers, where I was incarcerated from August 18, 2004 through December 17, 2004. I am currently a student at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Decreasing the required square footage per person in the dormitories is not a good idea. Speaking from my personal experience, after having been in admissions for about a week, I went to a dormitory which housed 100 women, with 50 per side on 25 bunkbeds. It is scary to stay in the same room as 49 other women. It is terrible; people get cranky, irritable, and touchy. It is nerve-wracking because you don't know if someone is going to do something. I was unable to sleep well the entire time that I was in the dormitory, out of concerns for safety because it was so crowded. Officers go on rounds, but I did not feel safe regardless. Decreasing the required square footage per person from 60' to 50' (and increasing the maximum number of people from 50 to 60) could only make the situation worse. There are not enough officers as it is, and increasing the ratio of incarcerated persons to staff will make it worse. It will be more nerve-wracking and more scary. The showers are already crowded as it is, with limited time to use them, and with more people it will be more difficult to stay clean.

While at Rikers I spent time in solitary confinement. Solitary confinement was the only place I was able to sleep well. The safest I felt was when I was in solitary confinement, but it is a bad place to be. I lost about 10-15lbs in 20 days while in solitary confinement. In solitary confinement you are not allowed food other than what they give you, and if you do not like that, you are out of luck. There are 12 hours between dinner and breakfast, and during that time you are starving. The increased use of 23-hour lock for people who have not committed any misconduct is a bad idea.

I don't think it's a problem to have detainees wear uniforms except that I don't think the DOC will be able to provide adequate clothing. While I was in the dormitory I was in charge of distributing uniforms to the people who had been sentenced. There definitely was not enough clothing, and not enough of the right sizes for the people who had been sentenced. The uniforms were often too small. I am not a large person, and it was even hard for me to find my size. The material also made my skin break out. I had horrible acne, which has never otherwise happened to me. There was also not enough clothing to keep people warm, and as a result they got sick. If the DOC is presently unable to provide adequate clothing for the people at Rikers who have been sentenced, it is unrealistic to expect it to be able to provide uniforms for the detainees.

Additionally, though the DOC claims that detainees will be allowed to wear personal clothes for their own criminal trials, I am concerned that this may not apply to family

court appearances. It will be highly prejudicial for detainees to appear in a jail uniform. Furthermore, your children should not have to see you in a jail uniform, whether at family court, or when visiting.

While I was at Rikers, I had to translate for other women who did not speak English. There is already not enough Spanish-speaking staff. I had to translate regarding everyday matters as well as medical issues, which of course raises confidentiality concerns. It is not right or fair to incarcerated persons to have to rely on other incarcerated people to translate for them, or for the BOC to repeal the requirement specifying that jails have sufficient Spanish-speaking staff and replace it with only vague requirements that they be able to understand communications from staff.

Overall, the amendments greatly increase discretion for DOC officials. This will be bad for the people incarcerated at Rikers. The officers are already condescending, and with more power they will be worse. . The male guards were better than the female guards, but women would get things from the male guards by trading sexual services. Increased discretion for the DOC, which would eventually give greater discretion to the individual guard, will make both of these problems worse.

Instead of adopting amendments that lower the DOC's requirements, I think that the BOC should enforce the Minimum Standards already in existence, and should strengthen them to improve Rikers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jacqueline Velez', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Jacqueline Velez

Statement Taken By: Justin Bernstein & Caroline Hsu
Fordham University School of Law