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Features

More Inmates at Brooklyn Jail If City Changes Standards

by Sarah Ryley (sarah@brooklyneagle.net), published online 04-20-2007

Critics Say Amendment Would Increase Violence, But Commissioner Says It Would Improve Conditions

By Sarah Ryley
Brooklyn Eagle

NEW YORK — The inmate population in the city is at a historic low, yet the Board of Correction is considering an amendment to its minimum standards that would pack 10 more inmates into 3,000 square-foot dormitories that now house up to 50 men or women. Advocates, former inmates and guards testified at a public hearing Tuesday that further condensing inmates would create a pressure-cooker environment, increasing the likelihood of violence and riots.

Department of Correction Commissioner Martin Horn was the only person during the six-hour hearing who testified in support of the amendment, saying it would allow the department to move more inmates off Rikers Island and maximize the use of the air-conditioned cells.

If approved, the amendment would directly affect the proposed reopening and expansion of the Brooklyn House of Detention by "increasing the number of inmates it allows us within the footprint and the space," Horn later told the Eagle. He said the amendment would bring the city more in line with state standards.

The Brooklyn jail was closed in 2003 because, with room for only 749 inmates, all in 5-by-8-foot individual cells, it was deemed inefficient, said department spokesman Steve Morello. The new tower would nearly double the jail's capacity with roughly 12 dormitories housing 720 inmates if the amendment is passed, or 600 if it's not.

The expansion is part of an overall effort to shift inmates who are now housed at Rikers Island to borough jails where they will be closer to their families, legal services, and the courts where their cases will be tried, said Horn. He is also pushing to build a 2,040-bed jail in the South Bronx while reducing the overall capacity of the city's jail system from 20,800 inmate beds to 18,700 beds.

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Roughly 80 percent of the men and women at Rikers Island have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial, and half are released within 10 days. The rest are serving up to a year for a misdemeanor offense.

“If they want to have more air-conditioned housing, they should construct more air-conditioned housing, rather than adopting more crowding,” said John Boston, director of the Prisoners’ Rights Project of the New York City Legal Aid Society. “That’s sort of the converse of saying, ‘I don’t want to build more facilities in order to accomplish that.’”

The board has granted variances to increase the number of inmates allowed in some city dormitories because of poor conditions in others, but there is no data directly comparing the level of violence in above-capacity dorms to below-capacity dorms, said Milton Zelermyer, a staff attorney for the Legal Aid Society. However, a number of judges have said overcrowding has been a significant cause of violence in the past.

“What they would be allowing by permitting increased overcrowding in dormitories would be based on nothing more than guesswork, and it’s not even an educated guess. And we think it’s just too big of a risk to take,” said Zelermyer.

“Increasing the number of detainees by 10 for each side of the dormitories increases the level of tension amongst inmates and staff, and delays access to telephones and personal hygiene units,” said Sidney Schwartzbaum, president of the Assistant Deputy Wardens–Deputy Wardens Association. “Officers assigned to these housing units must be alert for specific ‘tell-tale’ indicators as to changes in an inmate’s mental health status; increasing the number of inmates under custodial staff supervision diminishes that quality of supervision,” he said. “Let us not forget that the conditions of overcrowding were the major contributing factor in the 1970s riots.”

Of the several controversial amendments the Board of Correction is considering, board member Paul Vallone said, “I don’t think the [60-inmate amendment] is going to make it.”

Other amendments include giving wardens the ability to monitor phone calls and correspondence without warrants, mandatory 23-hour lock-ins for inmates living in individual cells for their own protection, and mandatory uniforms for detainees awaiting trial. Currently, only those serving time are required to wear uniforms.

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want to send a letter to detail more specifically your feelings on the Atlantic Yards project, send it to edit@brooklyneagle.net

Counting the minutes until I can go to a Nets game right here in Brooklyn and visit an avant-garde piece of architecture, at the same time!

It’s a good idea, but I wish they would change the scale or design of it somehow.

I’m indifferent, Atlantic Yards project doesn’t really effect me.

This might be the absolute worst thing to happen to Brooklyn – way to strangle the soul of a city, Ratner.

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