

*BATTLE OVER INMATE RIGHTS. CITY BOARD'S PLANS TO ALTER STANDARDS
DECRIED AT PUBLIC HEARING AS 'TAKING AWAY' FREEDOMS Daily News (New York)
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A PUBLIC HEARING over proposed changes to jail regulations turned into an ideological joust between prisoners' rights advocates and the board that oversees city lockups.

The Board of Correction hearing held yesterday was part of a process begun last year that could result in wholesale changes in the way prisoners are housed in the city. It would be the first significant modification of the Board of Correction's so-called minimum standards in about 30 years.

Among the most contested of the possible changes was the board's plans to broaden jailers' discretion in the monitoring of inmate mail and telephone calls without first getting a warrant.

"We're particularly concerned about using heightened security concerns as a justification for taking away rights," said Sarah Kunstler of the city chapter of the National Lawyers Guild. "It's important for us to be skeptical of any kind of surveillance."

Correction Department Commissioner Martin Horn, who testified at yesterday's day-long hearing, has long argued that monitoring phone calls - with an inmate's knowledge - helps secure the safety of the staff and prisoners.

"These are tools that every jail in the state has available," Horn said, adding that intelligence gained from conversations can prevent violence or the smuggling of contraband. "It does not compromise the privilege of attorney-client communication elsewhere in the state and it won't in New York City."

Correction officials said that monitoring calls also would help them assess threats tied to terrorism or gangs.

Other proposed changes include making all inmates wear uniforms. Currently, only sentenced inmates are required to do so. Correction officials said that amendment would make it harder for inmates to hide weapons or drugs and would increase the odds of apprehending escapees.

Another suggested update of the minimum standards would reduce the square footage - from 60 to 50 - required to house a prisoner. Opponents say that would increase violence between inmates, but officials say the proposed change brings the city in line with state standards.

The Board of Correction also is considering allowing 23-hour isolated lockups for certain categories of prisoners.

"That just makes people crazy," said Michael Mushlin, a law professor at Pace University. "It's state-sponsored torture."