

THE HONEST ROAD TO A SAFER RIKERS ISLAND: THE CORRECTION UNION PRESIDENT SAYS NYC MUST PRIORITIZE PROTECTING HIS OFFICERS

For the past eight years, the conditions in the nation's second-largest municipal jail system have disintegrated into a humanitarian crisis. At the core of this crisis lies an epidemic of jail violence, fueled by the previous administration's failure to restore safety and security in our jails. If there are any meaningful lessons learned from the failures of the past, it's that prioritizing a political ideology over safety and security and governing by activism, instead of pragmatism, has failed everyone in our detention centers.

While inmate activists, elected officials and some members of the media often blame the correction officers' union I lead as being the primary obstacle to jail reform, the truth is that we have spent the last eight years fighting to enact reforms intended to make our jails safer for everyone. In every city and state legislative hearing, every meeting held with former Correction Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi and former Mayor de Blasio, we brought detailed proposals to douse the flames of violence and to end the disorder that has plagued our facilities.

Every step of the way, our proposals were dismissed by key policy-makers and our cries for help went unanswered. A federal monitor issued report after report accusing our members of either being overly aggressive or not being aggressive enough. De Blasio forced our members to work dueling 24-hour shifts and then blamed officers for an unprecedented staffing crisis caused by his own failure to hire enough personnel. A then-councilman called us thugs and an inmate activist even accused COBA of being a "cheer-leader for mass incarceration!"

Despite all this political grand-standing and demonizing, we enter this new year ready, willing and able to work with other stakeholders to restore the safety, security and dignity everyone in our jails deserves.

To start, it's imperative for policymakers to consider our proposals to address some of our most urgent challenges.

Last month, a report by then-City Comptroller Scott Stringer analyzed jail violence indicators going back to 2011 and provides a glimpse into the steady rise in violence. The rate of inmate fights nearly quadrupled since 2011, with an 180% increase in FY 2021. Assaults on staff more than quintupled since 2011, with an increase of 24% last year. In addition, there were 247 stabbings and slashings in FY 2021, up from 123 the previous year. And only recently has the Department of Correction started tracking sexual assaults on officers, 22 of which occurred within the past year.

Jail violence can no longer be downplayed or be glibly blamed on my members. The department must

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BY BENNY BOSCIO

break up gangs housed by their gang affiliation and we must retain the ability to separate violent offenders from the general population when they attack our officers and non-violent inmates, otherwise known as punitive segregation. Mayor Adams is right to talk seriously about this idea even as advocates howl that it is no different from solitary confinement.

Assaults on staff and nonviolent inmates must be prosecuted swiftly and assaultive inmates should serve consecutive sentences. Sexual predators must also be held accountable. City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams introduced a resolution last month calling on Albany lawmakers to modify the criminal penal code to make the forcible touching of correction officers a felony instead of a misdemeanor. Sen. Diane Savino and Assemblyman David Weprin have introduced that legislation in the Legislature.

Critically, we must maintain optimal staffing levels. Our workforce has dwindled down to approximately 7,000 officers — well below the over 9,000 officers who were on the job just several years ago. Meantime, the inmate population in 2021 increased 58% from the previous year. Notwithstanding bail reform, we are still taking custody of individuals facing serious felony charges. About seven in 10 of those taken into custody throughout FY 2021 were awaiting trial on violent felony charges.

Safe staffing levels matter. The city should invest in hiring at least 2,000-2,500 new officers in order to backfill the positions lost over the past three years and to compensate for officers who have resigned, retired, or are being medically monitored. A total of 1,698 correction officers have resigned from Jan. 1, 2019 to the present, 1,008 have retired and only 75 have been hired in that same time period. That's a net loss of 2,631 officers in three years and that does not include the approximately 800 correction officers who are medically monitored as a result of being injured and not physically able to work in the jails. There are many more changes needed to end the crisis caused by eight years of gross mismanagement and neglect. We are willing to sit down and engage in productive conversations to discuss jail reforms with anyone who shares our commitment to safety and security. But reform cannot be one-sided. The pathway towards building a safer jail system must begin with listening to the boots on the ground.

Boscio is the president of the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association.