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Local News

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NYC Jail Inmates to Get Uniforms, Lose Telephone Privacy

NEW YORK (AP) -- Inmates at one of the country's biggest and most famous jails, the massive complex on Rikers Island, will soon have to start dressing the part.

The board that oversees the Department of Correction has approved a new set of jail standards that will require nearly all inmates to wear uniforms.

Previously, only those who had already been convicted were issued the jail's dark green uniforms. That left most of the system's prisoners (about 14,000 on an average day) dressed in their street clothes. About 80 percent of the inmates at Rikers and other city jails are people awaiting trial.

The change was one of several implemented Thursday by the Board of Correction that will mean small changes in the prisoners' lifestyles.

The standards overhaul, the broadest since 1978, also gave jail officials the authority to monitor and record inmate telephone calls without a court warrant and restrict certain types of inmate mail.

Most of those practices are common at big jails and prisons elsewhere in the country, but they were still opposed by inmate advocates.

"It has always been the case that New York City, at least on paper, has stood to a higher standard of civil liberties," said John Boston, director of the prisoners' rights project at the Legal Aid Society. "A majority of the changes they made will make things more intrusive or more restrictive for prisoners."

He praised the board, however, for turning down other proposals that had prompted complaints.

One would have relaxed overcrowding standards in jail dormitories. Currently, each inmate held in a group dorm, rather than a single-occupancy cell, is guaranteed at least 60 square feet of space. Jail administrators had wanted to reduce that to 50 square feet.

Jail administrators had argued that the lack of uniforms was a security problem. Institutional clothing, they said, will have fewer places where inmates can hide contraband or weapons.

A telephone taping system, they said, might also allow authorities to crack down on inmates who use the jail phone system to continue criminal activities or threaten potential witnesses or crime victims.

"These new policies will help us to keep our jails safe for the public, our staff and more than 100,000 inmates who come into our custody every year," Department of Correction Commissioner Martin F. Horn said in a written statement.

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