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NEWS

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ESSEX COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY CIVILIAN TASK FORCE ISSUES SPECIAL HOUSING UNITS SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

Essex County, NJ – The Essex County Correctional Facility Civilian Task Force released its CY2023 Special Housing Units Subcommittee Report. The report evaluates the compliance of the Essex County Correctional Facility (ECCF) with the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act (ICRA) and provides recommendations for improving operations and inmate conditions within the Special Housing Units (SHU). To read the complete CY2023 Special Housing Units Subcommittee Report, please visit the Task Force webpage at <https://essexcountynj.org/civilian-task/> and click on the link for "[Special Housing Units and the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act at the Essex County Correctional Facility](#)."

In 2019, the New Jersey Legislature enacted ICRA to limit the use of isolated confinement in jails and prisons across the state. The impetus for the legislation was twofold: a reactive effort to respond to citizen complaints about the misuse of isolated confinement, as well as a proactive effort by legislators to mitigate the adverse impacts of isolated confinement. The Task Force has reviewed the current ECCF SHU policies and practices. As part of its mandate to oversee the policies and practices of the ECCF, the Task Force SHU Subcommittee has taken upon itself an extensive review of the policies and practices of isolated confinement at the detention facility.

The Task Force addressed four related issues: (1) Is the ECCF complying with ICRA? (2) If not, what conditions are preventing full compliance? (3) What recommendations the Task Force might make to alter the conditions preventing compliance; and (4) What steps ECCF administrators could undertake to improve operations and inmate conditions in the SHU. The answers remain incomplete.

Subcommittee Chairman Rubin Sinins emphasized, "While ECCF has made substantial efforts to comply with ICRA, we cannot conclude that ECCF is currently in complete compliance with ICRA's prohibitions against excessive time in isolated confinement and the isolation of vulnerable populations."

Subcommittee member Alessandra DeBlasio added, "ECCF has been responsive to the Subcommittee's requests for inmate access in the SHU and suggestions for improved record-keeping to enhance transparency. However, we remain concerned about institutional limitations that result in the SHU consistently operating at maximum capacity and housing a significant number of vulnerable inmates who would be better served in a mental health facility."

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The Task Force's report sheds light on the ongoing efforts to evaluate and improve the ECCF's compliance with ICRA and to enhance the conditions and operations within the SHU. The Task Force urges ECCF administrators to carefully consider the recommendations put forth in the report and work towards implementing necessary changes.

Subcommittee member Imran Rabbani stated, "The completion of the Special Housing Unit Subcommittee Report does not denote the conclusion of our endeavors to identify and redress non-compliance with ICRA at ECCF. Instead, it establishes a solid framework to guide ongoing efforts with Essex County to address this issue comprehensively. We anticipate the integration of our recommendations into existing ECCF policy and procedure."

Task Force Chairman, Governor Jim McGreevey, commented, "On behalf of the Task Force, I express my gratitude to Committee Chairman Sinins, members DeBlasio and Rabbani for their thorough and exacting report. I am grateful to County Executive DiVincenzo and Chief Alagia for providing full and unfettered access to County Correctional Facility documentation, records, and reports, even when data and reports demonstrate the need for continued improvement. Lastly, this Report highlights difficult issues, which in some measure depend upon federal and state flexibility to provide satisfactory clinical 'best practice' alternatives. The Task Force will continue to hold hearings particularly as to the need for mental health diversion and treatment both within and outside of the correctional setting."

The intent of the nine-member task force is to provide "transparency and accountability" of the ECCF staff, to protect the "lives, health, safety and rights of all people confined at the ECCF" and ensure the "conditions of their confinement are safe, sanitary, respectful and humane," according to language in the ordinance. It will act independently of County government and have the authority to inspect the ECCF, interview corrections officers, inmates, detainees, and review systematic issues and concerns.

Members of the Task Force were nominated by Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo, Jr. and appointed by the Board of County Commissioners in June 2020 through an established advice and consent procedure that is used to fill vacancies on all county boards and commissions.

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