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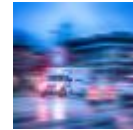
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By CHELSIA ROSE MARCIUS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | NOV 30, 2019



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Correction Department officials Faye Yelardy, Sarena Townsend and Prechelle S. Shannon worked to improve procedures for handling sex assault and abuse complaints at the Rose M. Singer Center on Rikers Island. They hope the reforms can be repeated at other Rikers Island facilities. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

An overhaul of the city Department of Correction's investigation division has reduced sex assaults in a major Rikers Island facility — a success story officials hope can be repeated elsewhere at the troubled jail complex.

The changes pushed by female jail administrators beefed up the investigative staff, revamped employee training, and added orientation for inmates on victims' rights.

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The slew of reforms helped the womens' facility on Rikers pass a high-stakes federal audit for the first time.

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Inmate advocates say the department needs to go further, and meet the city's own more stringent standards for combating sexual violence. Nonetheless, Correction officials say they are pleased with their progress so far.

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“We’re changing the way we do business,” said Faye Yelardy, the assistant commissioner of the DOC’s office of sexual abuse and sexual harassment prevention. “We’re moving forward.”

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A three-day review conducted in May by an independent auditor certified by the U.S. Department of Justice found the Rose M. Singer Center on Rikers Island — a women’s facility — had met or exceeded all 300 standards set forth by the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act.

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The NYC Department of Correction PREA team (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

Allegations of sexual abuse at the facility dropped more than 40% between the last six months of 2018 and the first six months of this year, Correction Department data says. There was a 24% decrease in accusations across all jails during the same period.

Now the department is looking to do it again. Two more detention centers at Rikers — North Infirmery Command and the West Facility — are awaiting the results of recent audits. DOC officials are also gearing up for another audit in a fourth facility.

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“It’s not just about getting a good report,” Yelardy said. “It’s really about making the facilities safe.”

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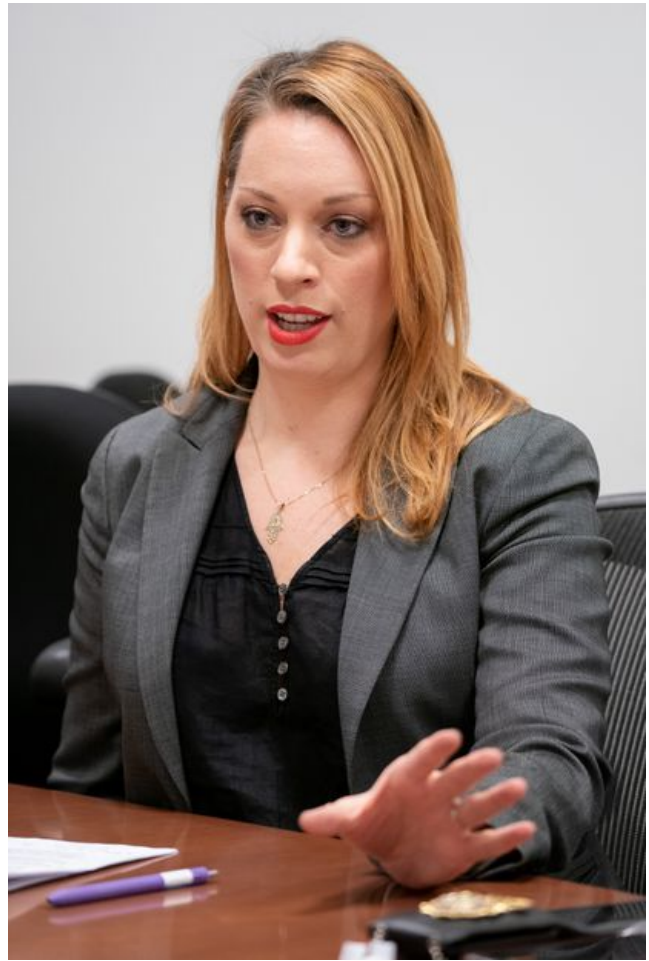
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“(We said), ‘This is what we need to do. Now, how do we get there?’,” Yelardy explained. “Together as a department — as a team — we came up with a plan.”

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Correction officers, investigators, contractors, volunteers and civilian staff members have undergone thousands of hours of training — some of which was initially met with resistance, said Prechelle Shannon, the DOC’s senior institution administrator.



Sarena Townsend, DOC Deputy Commissioner Investigation and Trials Division. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

“(I ask them) what if this was you? What if this was your family member?... What would you want the people in charge of their custody to do?” Shannon said. “When you humanize the situation people start to look at it differently and they start to listen.”

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The Department of Correction has long come under fire for how it handles sexual abuse and harassment complaints. Last year, [a backlog of more than 1,200 sex abuse and harassment cases](#) drew ire from criminal justice advocates and members of the City Council.

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That backlog has since been cleared, officials said — one of the many factors that made passing the federal audit possible.

“We advocated very aggressively for more staffing,” said Sarena Townsend, the deputy commissioner of investigation and trials. “We picked quality people, we trained them and then we strategically restructured.”

Prechelle S. Shannon, Senior Institution Administrator, Office of Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment Prevention, NYC Department of Correction. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

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To clear the backlog, the department grew its investigation unit from nine investigators in April 2018 to 30 today. But clearing old cases while trying to keep up with new ones has proved challenging.

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Coordinator, Office of Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment Prevention at the NYC DOC. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

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The DOC [reported](#) in August that it had only closed 19 of 271 assault cases from July through December 2018 and only 42 of the 205 cases from January to June of this year. An April audit conducted by the [Board of Correction](#) — a city oversight body that keeps tabs on the department — also found concerns regarding the timeliness and quality of sexual abuse investigations.

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Kelly Grace Price, co-founder of the [Close Rosies](#) advocacy group, said the department has not met the [city's Prison Rape Elimination Act, or PREA, standards](#), which are more stringent than federal laws meant to curb jail violence.

The DOC "is trying to conflate the federal PREA law and the local PREA standards," she

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Yet for Yelardy, a former sex crimes and domestic violence prosecutor, the Rose M. Singer Center audit is one of many big changes that she's seen in her 13 years with Correction.

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"This department is maturing . . . There's a lot of reform going on," she said. "There's always a new challenge we have to overcome."



Chelsia Rose Marcus

New York Daily News



Chelsia Rose Marcus is the criminal justice reporter at the New York Daily News. She is also the author of Wild Escape: The Prison Break from Dannemora and the Manhunt that Captured America. When she's not out reporting, Chelsia teaches aspiring journalists at New York University.

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