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By Post Staff Report

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In August, an inmate serving 15-45 years for manslaughter, burglary and attempted arson beat a correction sergeant so badly that he was hospitalized with two broken ribs and a punctured lung. In September, an inmate doing 15-to-life for murder and robbery assaulted two correction officers after they tried to break up a fight he was having with other inmates.

After these incidents — which are unfortunately common inside New York’s correctional system — these inmates were removed from the general population. Following a legal hearing process, they were sentenced to disciplinary confinement in a special housing unit — SHU, what outsiders call “solitary.”

This is our reality. Inmates continue to perpetrate violence even after they’ve lost their freedom and are living behind prison walls. So correction staff face a dual challenge: 1) provide safety and security to both inmates and fellow staff, while 2) also implementing programs designed to rehabilitate inmates so that they live as law-abiding citizens once they return to society.

Critics —like the Correctional Association, an agenda-driven advocacy organization that would have New York abolish the practice outright — either don’t have experience inside the correctional system, or wrongly assume disciplinary confinement is used arbitrarily.

In fact, disciplinary confinement in the SHU is a critical tool for ensuring this stability and safety inside a correctional facility — both for other inmates and the staff working there.

And contrary to popular misconception, the SHU bears no resemblance to the Hollywood stereotypes that perpetrate a myth of inhumane treatment. Inmates are closely monitored through constant rounds made by correction officers, security staff, prison management, mental-health staff, medical personnel, the inmate- grievance coordinator and other staff. They are allowed reading and legal materials.

In some cases, inmates can participate in limited programs, earn privileges or reduce their time in disciplinary confinement. Some are even housed in two-man cells.

And they get time to exercise; some with substance-abuse problems can participate in treatment programs.

Make no mistake — disciplinary confinement is a punishment for violating the code of conduct inside the prison walls. It’s the only mechanism now in place for removing an inmate from the general population for the protection of staff, other inmates or sometimes even the inmate himself.

It is a particularly important strategy in New York’s medium-security facilities, where inmates live in dorms with dozens of other inmates. In this setting, a violent disruption not only threatens the safety of others, but it prevents orderly inmates from taking part in the educational and other programs aimed at helping them transition back to society. Restoring order to the dorm environment allows others to continue the rehabilitative process without distraction or threat of assault.

Today’s policies have evolved over decades of experience. And prison security staff — all members of the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, the union I lead — are always working to make the system better.

State Correction Commissioner Brian Fischer was right to include NYSCOPBA in the SHU Task Force discussions as it carefully considers the current disciplinary segregation policy. While we continue to implement the current laws and regulations, we know that the smartest and most effective policy changes come from those of us working in the field.

Our union and its members are open to amending these policies — as long as the goal remains to protect public safety and the safety of our members. But let’s dispense with hyperbolic accusations and trafficking in badly outdated imagery from Hollywood prison movies.

While many inmates will serve their time without incident, we must be prepared to deal with the violent behavior and disruptions perpetrated by those who refuse to spend their time incarcerated to better themselves. Disciplinary segregation is a strategy that has been proven to restore stability and safety to the correctional environment. Implemented thoughtfully, it’s a critical tool in today’s prisons.

*Donn Rowe is the president of the New York State Corrections Officers & Police Benevolent Association.*