



Inspection Report

Northern State Prison, Restorative Housing Unit (RHU)

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Inspection Report, Northern State Prison RHU

New Jersey Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson

Introduction and Executive Summary

In December 2023, the New Jersey Department of Corrections reopened a 650-bed housing unit at Northern State Prison that had been out of use for more than a year, designating it as a Restorative Housing Unit (RHU), a disciplinary placement for people who have been found guilty of institutional rule violations in a due process hearing, where they have restricted activities, possessions, and privileges. The building consists of four wings, each of which has three floors of close custody cells. The RHU currently houses more than 400 individuals serving disciplinary sanctions.

Staff from the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson toured the facility nearly every week since it opened in December to respond to contacts from the population housed there. The Office received nearly 300 contacts from people housed on the unit and their loved ones between January and April of 2024, largely relating to living conditions and health care. We conducted two announced inspections on April 4 and May 31, 2024, and one unannounced inspection on July 22, 2024. This public report summarizes findings related to living conditions in the RHU, including several notable improvements made by the Department of Corrections.

Many of the conditions observed by the Ombudsperson Office in the winter and early spring had been meaningfully addressed by summer. The facility's leadership took action to ensure those housed in the RHU had more consistent access to showers, laundry service, trash collection, toilet paper, and personal hygiene products. The Department also took action to address drug use and mental health emergencies on the unit. The people housed in the RHU report improved access to the phone and the grievance system, and increased access to outdoor recreation. Custody staff on the unit report a decrease in the number of security codes and assaults on staff, which is confirmed by their daily activity logs. Still, the RHU remains a very challenging post for officers.

Despite these improvements, some serious concerns have persisted. Plumbing and drainage problems regularly cause leaks and flooding in occupied cells. Sewage and wastewater spill into some decommissioned (unoccupied) cells. People housed in the RHU have been exposed to extended periods of cold and hot temperatures. This issue is caused by drug use on the unit and is related to fire safety mechanisms that shut off the HVAC system when smoke is detected, causing the heat to turn off in the winter and the air conditioning to turn off in the summer. Those living on the unit continue to report a lack of cleaning supplies for their rooms and a lack of air circulation, because electrical outlets (which could be used to plug in a personal fan) are turned off. The Ombudsperson Office hears persistent complaints related to accessing health care providers for illnesses and injuries. Staffing shortages have led to scheduled rolling lockdowns in the RHU wings. During these lockdowns, staff are pooled to provide services to some units while others are kept in their cells for the full day with minimal services. Unstructured congregate interaction time has been canceled indefinitely in the RHU, and people report getting outdoor recreation about once or twice per month. The unit would operate more smoothly with fewer people living on it, but extraordinary delays in disciplinary hearings and an inefficient process for upgrading/graduating people through the Levels of RHU privileges keep the population stubbornly high.

The problems in the Northern State Prison RHU are not easy to fix. Supervisors and administrators have made difficult and practical choices under the circumstances and addressing one problem often creates or exacerbates others. Disrupting drug use by turning off the electrical outlets, for example, prevents people from plugging in fans. Deescalating disturbances to avoid unnecessary applications of force results in less time for people to get out for showers. Pooling staff to provide services on some wings requires locking down other wings. The facility staff and administration have made notable and significant progress, and deserve credit and recognition for those efforts.

To protect the health and wellbeing of people housed in the RHU at Northern State Prison, the Department of Corrections should reduce the population in the RHU and audit health care access for those living there. Lawmakers should set minimum standards for the habitability of a prison housing unit and mandate public reporting of certain RHU data. These recommendations are described in more detail at the conclusion of this report.



Three tiers of cells in an RHU wing at Northern State Prison and individual cages for accessing the phone and kiosk. Photograph taken by Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, April 4, 2024.

Conditions of Confinement

Since reopening in December 2023, the RHU building at Northern State Prison has experienced recurring flooding and plumbing problems, caused in part by the aging infrastructure of the building itself and in part by objects flushed down the toilets. Across multiple inspection visits, the Ombudsperson Office observed cells with water dripping or seeping from toilets onto the floor, water leaking from pipes or dripping down the walls, sometimes onto bedding and mattresses, and as recently as the July 22 inspection, wastewater and sewage pooling on the floor of a decommissioned cell and spilling out into the hallway.

A combination of factors exacerbated these problems, many of which the Department has since addressed and corrected. During the Ombudsperson Office's April 4th inspection, for example, we observed people held in cells with leaking toilets and pipes and large piles of trash, without access to cleaning supplies, soap, or regular showers. The population was not able to use fans for air circulation because the electrical outlets were turned off.¹ A majority reported not having been given toothpaste since they arrived on the unit. Large numbers of people reported having only two pairs of underwear and having to wash them by hand in the sink. They had one set of bedsheets and few if any changes of clothes, with no laundry service or linen exchange for months. Staffing issues and disruptive behavior by the incarcerated population contributed to these living conditions. They are discussed below on pp. 10-12.

The Northern State Prison administration took quick responsive action to the Office's findings, scheduling recurring delivery of personal hygiene items, laundry, sheet exchange, and trash pick-up. During the Office's May 31st inspection, administrators and staff described these new processes and Ombudsperson Office staff members observed significant improvements in cleanliness. In interviews conducted during the July 22nd unannounced inspection, people housed in the RHU confirmed that they regularly receive toilet paper, personal hygiene items, laundry service, and trash pick-up. People reported usually getting two showers per week, a notable improvement since the spring, but still short of the three-showers-per-week target written in the Department's policy and state regulations.² Those living in the RHU continued to express concerns about not getting cleaning supplies for their cells and not being able to use fans for air circulation, a problem that felt especially acute when indoor temperatures got above 80 degrees. The unit logs and schedule reflect the availability of cleaning supplies, and access to cleaning supplies appears to have improved with a dedicated staff member over property, hygiene items, and supplies.

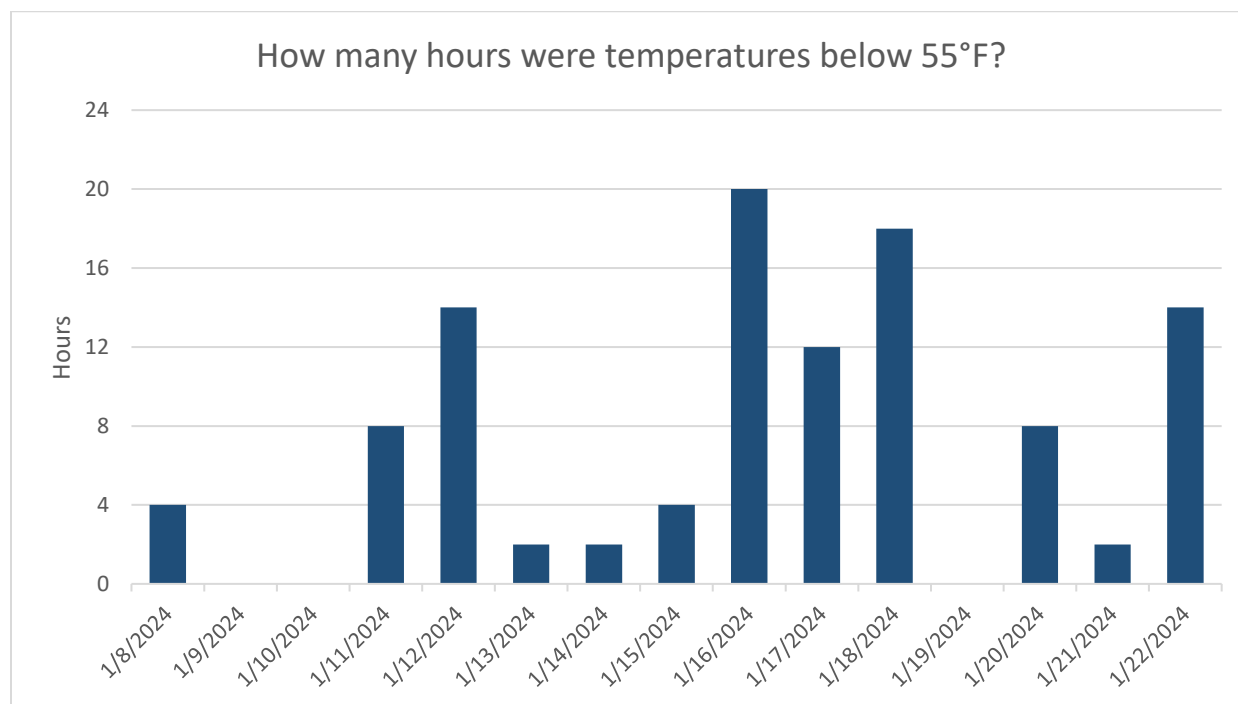
The RHU at Northern State Prison is a temperature-controlled unit, but the HVAC system shuts off as a fire suppression measure whenever sensors detect smoke, a requirement of the New Jersey Fire Code. Because drug use has become a systemic problem throughout jails and prisons in the United States as K2

¹ People housed in the Northern State Prison RHU were notified by the facility administrator in a December 14, 2023 memo that the heating system was shutting down because of the presence of smoke, and that electrical outlets in their cells were being disabled in an effort to stop people from using them as an ignition point for illegal drug use.

² New Jersey Department of Corrections Level I / III Internal Management Procedure IMM.004.RHU.03 (revised Feb. 2, 2024) states, "Each incarcerated person housed in a close custody unit shall be given the opportunity to shower not less than three times a week, unless permitting this activity would present an undue security hazard." NJ Admin. Code §10A:5-1.3 states "Each inmate in a close custody unit shall be permitted to shave and shower three times a week, as indicated in the inmate handbook, unless permitting these activities would present an undue security hazard."

(a synthetic psychoactive drug) and other hard-to-detect substances have entered facilities, people attempting to burn paper and smoke the substances create enough smoke and chemical particles in the air to trigger the sensors and shut down the HVAC system. There was a significant amount of drug use in the RHU during the winter when the building was first reopened. Staff and the population housed on the unit complained frequently about the air quality and being exposed to smoke and burning chemicals on the unit. Because the smoke often caused the heat to go out, the Ombudsperson Office also received a large volume of complaints about the cold. During a two-week period in January, for example, indoor temperatures dropped below 55°F on 11 out of 14 days. When temperatures got that cold, they stayed below 55° for an average of 9.8 hours per day.³ (See Figure 1.) During routine tours to speak with people housed in the RHU this past winter, Ombudsperson Office staff observed people with no warm clothing and only a single thin blanket. The Department ultimately addressed the concerns by providing people with a second blanket, monitoring and resetting the heaters when they switched off, and consulting with vendors about their options for keeping the heat on. They also took significant steps to investigate and disrupt the flow of drugs into the RHU. Still, there were extended periods of time when people housed in the unit were exposed to very cold temperatures rather than being relocated to a building with consistent heat.

Figure 1. Number of hours that indoor temperatures in the RHU were below 55°F, January 8-22, 2024



During the Ombudsperson Office’s July 22 inspection, many of the people we interviewed complained about the summer heat, suggesting that the air conditioning was inconsistent and that indoor temperatures were often very high. The Office reviewed three weeks of daily activity logs maintained by

³ Temperature logs for Northern State Prison RHU, 3- and 4-wing, provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections for January 8-22, 2024. State regulations require “proper room temperatures” in cells within close custody units, but do not further define temperature standards. See NJ Admin. Code §10A:5-1.3.

staff in the RHU between June 17 and July 7. Indoor temperatures were 80°F or warmer on half of those days, getting as high as 88° on July 7.⁴ Hot temperatures that in other settings might be mitigated with fans or bottled water are harder to bear in the RHU where electrical outlets in three of the four building wings have been turned off to discourage smoking and where bottles of water have been prohibited as a measure to prevent incarcerated people from throwing liquids on staff. The Ombudsperson Office remains concerned that people housed in the RHU at Northern State Prison, and those working on the unit, may be regularly exposed to very cold conditions in winter and very hot conditions in summer.

⁴ Indoor temperatures in the RHU at Northern State Prison were recorded in daily activity logs at the start of each staffing shift. The Ombudsperson Office reviewed logs for June 17 – July 7, 2024. Temperatures were recorded as 80°F or warmer on June 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, and 28, and on July 1, 2, and 7. Records provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections.

Communication and Access to Services

When a person's movement is limited because of placement in a disciplinary housing unit, their ability to report a problem or to get help in a crisis relies on access to other people (custody supervisors, social service providers, medical and mental health care providers, the Ombudsperson Office, etc.). This access hinges on being granted time on the kiosk, and on staff making rounds to the cells on each tier to speak with people and pick up paper grievances and sick call slips.⁵

According to DOC policy, a person's access to the phone and kiosk is fairly restricted when they first enter the RHU (Level 1) but becomes less restricted when they graduate to RHU Level 2.⁶ People on RHU Level 1 can make one 15-minute phone call per week, and can use the kiosk only to submit electronic inquiries, grievances, appeals, and sick call slips. Once they are elevated to Level 2, the policy authorizes four additional phone calls per week, full access to other amenities on the kiosk (email, music, games, etc.), and the ability to use a personal tablet.

During the Ombudsperson Office's April 4 inspection, people in three-quarters of the cells we visited reported no regular access to the kiosk to file inquiries, grievances, appeals, or sick call slips electronically.⁷ Several individuals reported getting to the kiosk only once in the previous month and others reported kiosk access being routinely interrupted by security codes. In two-thirds of the cells we visited people reported access to the phone being rare and irregular.⁸ Large numbers of people reported that social services would come to the housing unit but did not come to speak to them at their cell door, and that they had limited access to paper grievance forms and no secure way to submit them. The Department provided summaries of unit logs that paint a different picture. During a two-week period in March 2024, for example, the log summaries suggest that phone and kiosk were offered to nearly the full population once per week, a notable discrepancy from what was reported by the population.

When the Ombudsperson Office made an unannounced follow-up inspection on July 22, the Level 1 population in RHU for the most part reported regular rounds conducted by social services and regular weekly access to the phone and kiosk unless disrupted by a security code.⁹ Those who had been in the RHU for longer periods of time reported seeing improvements in these areas.

From December 2023, when the unit reopened, through July 2024, people in the Northern State Prison RHU have consistently reported problems with access to health care. Medical complaints were the second-most common reason people from the RHU reached out to the Ombudsperson Office with

⁵ JPAY kiosks are physical terminals that provide incarcerated people with a point of access to an electronic information and communication system for various services including the grievance system and sick call requests.

⁶ New Jersey Department of Corrections, Level I / III Internal Management Procedure IMM.004.RHU.03. A more detailed description of the process for "leveling up" from RHU Level 1 to RHU Level 2 is included in the body of this report on p. 11.

⁷ People in 89 of 118 cells surveyed (75.4%) during the Ombudsperson Office's April 4, 2024 announced inspection reported no regular access to the kiosk.

⁸ People in 77 of 118 cells surveyed (65.2%) during the Ombudsperson Office's April 4, 2024 announced inspection reported no regular access to the phone.

⁹ Note that DOC policy does not limit kiosk access to one time per week, but because the kiosks and phones are located in individual cages on the RHU wings rather than in a congregate recreation area, access to the kiosk is provided at Northern State Prison's RHU only when a person gets their weekly phone call.

requests for assistance.¹⁰ Additionally, at both the April announced inspection and the July unannounced inspection, significant numbers of people said that nurses passing out medication did not make rounds to each cell, that their sick call requests were never answered, or that they were never transported to see health care providers.¹¹ Data from early in the year on security codes show about one emergency medical response code per day in the RHU in January and February, increasing to nearly two medical emergencies per day in March.¹² (See Figure 2.) Between January and March, about twice as many medical codes were called than codes for fights, assaults, or other disturbances. High numbers of emergency medical codes are not proof of neglect or system dysfunction, but they may be further evidence that people on the unit were having difficulty accessing care when they first started feeling symptoms.

Figure 2. Emergency medical codes in the RHU at Northern State Prison, January – March, 2024

<i>Month</i>	Number of emergency medical codes
<i>January 2024</i>	31
<i>February 2024</i>	30
<i>March 2024</i>	55

One of the most significant risks of housing people in settings like the RHU where they have very controlled movement and limited access to the kiosk is that the process for communicating a health care need and being seen by a health care provider involves multiple connected steps that may not always be reliable. When any part of the process falls short—for example, when a hand-written sick call slip isn’t picked up by a staff member making rounds, when the box for sick call slips isn’t checked by health care staff, when health care staff don’t ask for the person to be brought to the medical clinic, or when the person isn’t transported to the clinic to be seen—the opportunity to receive care is disrupted. This is a persistent and high-stakes concern that requires routine internal monitoring and removal of any unreasonable barriers to care.¹³

Another serious risk in settings like the RHU is mental health deterioration. The Ombudsperson Office has not done a review of mental health records, but one clear data point that suggests a high level of despair and mental health crisis is suicidal behavior. From mid-December 2023 through the end of March 2024,

¹⁰ The most common area of complaint to the Ombudsperson office from people in the Northern State Prison RHU has been poor living conditions.

¹¹ New Jersey Department of Corrections, Health Care Compliance Unit Level I / III Internal Management Procedure MED.IMA.002 requires nurses making daily rounds in the RHU “to evaluate each [incarcerated person] for any health complaints, requests for sick call, etc.” and states that sick call request forms will be collected at this time.

¹² Data on RHU security codes provided by the New Jersey Department of Corrections for December 2023 – March 2024. (The report reflects data from January through March, because the building was reopened and populated in mid-December and the first full month of data was for January 2024.)

¹³ See National Commission on Correctional Health Care *Standards for Health Services in Prisons* (2018), Standard P-A-01 Access to Care, which requires that incarcerated people have access to care for their serious medical, dental, and mental health needs. To be compliant with the national standard, the responsible health authority must identify and eliminate any unreasonable barriers, intentional and unintentional, to incarcerated people being seen by a qualified health care professional in a timely manner.

there were 16 security codes activated for self-harming behavior. There were also two completed suicides in the Northern State Prison RHU in March.¹⁴

The Department made notable efforts to address the problem of people experiencing mental health crises. At both the April inspection and the July inspection, people housed in the RHU reported regular rounds made by mental health providers to see people on the special needs caseload, which includes slightly less than half of the RHU population.¹⁵ Following the two suicides in March, the Department also dispatched a wellness officer to walk the tiers on each shift and check in on the population, and engaged a taskforce focused on self-harm which now includes a member of the Ombudsperson Office.

¹⁴ Data on RHU security codes were provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections for December 11, 2023 – March 31, 2024. Northern State Prison administrators notified the Ombudsperson Office of deaths within 24 hours of each incident, with final cause and manner of death determined after investigation by the Department’s Special Investigations Division and the Essex County Medical Examiner.

¹⁵ Data from the New Jersey Department of Corrections shows 187 people on the special needs caseload in the Northern State Prison RHU on July 31, 2024. A person is placed on the caseload if they are diagnosed with an Axis I or II mental health disorder by a qualified provider.

Staffing and Population Management

Like most of the correctional facilities in the state, Northern State Prison has experienced recurring critical staffing shortages that have impacted operations in the RHU. As a temporary measure starting in April 2024, the facility administration instituted rolling lockdowns on one or more of the RHU wings each day in order to pool staff and manage daily operations on the other wings—a practice that has now become semi-permanent. Locked-down wings with more than 100 incarcerated people have minimal staffing, and people housed on a locked-down wing do not come out of their cells that day for showers, time on the kiosk, recreation, or programming.

Out-of-cell recreation time, in particular, suffers when there are insufficient staff members to accommodate it. People interviewed during the Ombudsperson Office’s July inspection generally reported getting out for recreation in the yard about one to two times per month. While this is an increase from what people reported during our April inspection, it still falls short of the five-hours-per-week target for recreation time as set in DOC policy.¹⁶ The Office reviewed a recent three week sample of daily activity logs maintained on the RHU for the wings housing people on Level 1 restrictions. The logs showed 10% of the population getting yard time in the first week, 32% of the population getting yard time the second week, and 41% of the population getting yard time the third week.¹⁷ The same logs tracked out-of-cell time for programming and school, showing 20% of the population getting out for these activities in the first week, 10% in the second week, and 9% in the third week.¹⁸

Administration at Northern State Prison has indefinitely canceled all unstructured congregate interaction time for people on RHU Level 1, determining that it was too disruptive and unproductive. Department policy authorizes an administrator to restrict congregate interaction time in 15-day increments, not to exceed 90 days.¹⁹ It does not appear to authorize canceling congregate interaction on a permanent ongoing basis.

Out-of-cell time is easier to facilitate when there are fewer people housed in the RHU, but extraordinary delays in disciplinary hearings at Northern State Prison, and an inefficient policy for graduating people through the Levels of RHU, result in a larger number of people housed on the unit than can be managed

¹⁶ New Jersey Department of Corrections, Level I / III Internal Management Procedure IMM.004.RHU.03 states: “Each incarcerated person assigned to Restorative housing shall be afforded a minimum of five (5) hours of recreation per week, unless compelling security, disciplinary, safety or weather considerations dictate otherwise.”

¹⁷ For the week of June 17-23, 2024, the population on 2-wing, 3-wing, and 4-wing averaged 313 people, and the daily activity logs showed 31 individuals coming out of their cells for recreation in the yard. For the week of June 24-30, 2024, the population on 2-wing, 3-wing, and 4-wing averaged 311 people, and the daily activity logs showed 98 individuals coming out of their cells for recreation in the yard. For the week of July 1-7, 2024, the population on 2-wing, 3-wing, and 4-wing averaged 317 people, and the daily activity logs showed 130 individuals coming out of their cells for recreation in the yard. Records provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections.

¹⁸ For the week of June 17-23, 2024, the population on 2-wing, 3-wing, and 4-wing averaged 313 people, and the daily activity logs showed 62 individuals coming out of their cells for school or social services programming. For the week of June 24-30, 2024, the population on 2-wing, 3-wing, and 4-wing averaged 311 people, and the daily activity logs showed 32 individuals coming out of their cells for school or social services programming. For the week of July 1-7, 2024, the population on 2-wing, 3-wing, and 4-wing averaged 317 people, and the daily activity logs showed 29 individuals coming out of their cells for school or social services programming. Records provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections.

¹⁹ New Jersey Department of Corrections Level I / III Internal Management Procedure IMM.004.RHU.03.

with the current level of staffing. A person who has been charged with a disciplinary violation should generally be seen by a hearing officer within three days.²⁰ In the RHU at Northern State Prison, however, people regularly wait months for a disciplinary hearing as part of the court line process, which on any given day has a backlog of roughly 500 cases. Once adjudicated and formally sanctioned to the RHU, a person can graduate back out to general population by upgrading from RHU Level 1 (the most restricted level of activities, possessions, and privileges) to Level 2 (partially restored activities, possessions, and privileges), and then upgrading again back to general population.²¹ People on Level 1 who have demonstrated good behavior, however, are not automatically and routinely reviewed for a Level upgrade. DOC policy requires that a staff member assigned to the RHU make individual requests for a person to be upgraded to a higher level, a process that is difficult to implement at a large scale with insufficient staffing.²²

The RHU at Northern State Prison is not an easy post for staff. Officers assigned to the RHU are in the unenviable position of running the unit with a population engaged in significant disruptive behavior. Leaders of the correctional officers' union, PBA Local 105, point to double-bunking and conflicts between cellmates as a significant source of disruption in the RHU. In January 2024, security codes were called by officers over the radio to respond to disturbances or emergencies on all but seven days, averaging 1.5 codes per day. Disruptions increased in the following months with two codes per day in February, and an average of more than three codes per day in March.²³ Responding to security codes can be dangerous and de-escalation techniques can be time consuming. In the month of March, seven security codes were called to break up fights or assaults between incarcerated people, three codes were called to respond to people throwing feces or bodily fluids on staff, seven security codes were called in response to people setting fires, and 19 security codes were called for various other disturbances (refusals to return to a cell, damaging property, etc.). The humiliation and repulsiveness of being assaulted with feces or bodily fluids, and the associated risks to a person's health, are not things officers should be subjected to. They are indignities and workplace hazards that make it harder to retain staff at a time when officer shortages are already quite significant. We support calls from the officers' union for data on staff assaults to be tracked and studied to better understand and address the underlying issues.

²⁰ NJAC §10A:4-9.8(c) ("Inmates confined in Prehearing Disciplinary Housing shall receive a hearing within three calendar days of their placement in Prehearing Disciplinary Housing, including weekends and holidays, unless there are exceptional circumstances, unavoidable delays, or reasonable postponements."); *See also* New Jersey Department of Corrections, Level I / III Internal Management Procedure ADM.019.003.PHDH, which states that members of a vulnerable population as defined by the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act may be housed in an RHU pre-hearing.

²¹ The process is different for a person serving an RHU sanction for assaulting staff. In these cases, the person is not eligible to be moved from Level 1 to Level 2 unless the review is initiated and approved by a Special Administrative Review Committee. New Jersey Department of Corrections Level I / III Internal Management Procedure IMM.004.RHU.03.

²² *See* New Jersey Department of Corrections Level I / III Internal Management Procedure IMM.004.RHU.03.

²³ Security code data provided by the New Jersey Department of Corrections for December 2023 – March 2024.



A tier of cells in an RHU wing at Northern State Prison. Photo taken by Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, April 4, 2024.

Security codes also disrupt unit operations and time to access showers, phone calls, and recreation. They disrupt the ability of social workers and mental health care providers to make rounds and see people. At times they also delay meals and basic services like laundry. These disruptions in services and out-of-cell time in turn contribute to further psychological deterioration for people housed in the RHU and more desperate and disruptive behavior to draw attention to unmet needs. Misbehavior drives poor living conditions, and poor living conditions lead to more misbehavior, in a negative feedback spiral that is increasingly hard to break. Several improvements, however, have been noted by staff on the unit. During our inspections in May and June, they reported fewer security codes and splashing incidents involving assaults with bodily fluids compared to reports during the inspection in April. A new protocol of securely escorting people to and from the shower made a significant impact on the number of disruptions caused by incarcerated people refusing to return to their cells. Daily activity logs for three weeks in the summer confirm reductions in the number and frequency of security codes.²⁴ Better communication with the incarcerated population has helped to manage expectations and schedule adjustments have been made to accommodate more consistent rounds by mental health and social services staff—signs of significant effort and strategic planning.

²⁴ Daily activity logs show three security codes the week of June 17-23, 2024, eight codes the week of June 24-30, 2024, and two codes the week of July 1-7. Records provided by New Jersey Department of Corrections.

Recommendations

- 1. Reduce the population in the RHU.** With roughly 400 people housed in the RHU at Northern State Prison, staffing levels require one or more wings to be locked down on most days, and people receive less out-of-cell time for recreation and showers than the Department's RHU policy envisions. Securely moving people out of their cells in an RHU setting is staff intensive, and would be more manageable with a smaller population. To reduce the population in the Northern State Prison RHU, we recommend that the Department consider:

 - Assessing those on the special needs caseload for placement in alternative settings,
 - Investing additional resources into court line to eliminate the backlog of disciplinary hearings, and to process new cases within the required timeframe, and
 - Adopting automatic reviews of most or all individuals on RHU Level 1 restrictions who have gone 30 days without new disciplinary infractions for possible upgrades to Level 2.
- 2. Audit health care access in the RHU.** In the first few months that the RHU was reopened, the number of emergency medical codes eclipsed the number of security codes for fights, assaults, and other disturbances. At both the April and July inspections, significant numbers of people reported sick call requests going unanswered or never being transported to see health care providers. While the logistics of providing access to health care services may be complicated in a setting like the RHU, the Department of Corrections and Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC) have a responsibility to identify and eliminate any unreasonable barriers to care. The Ombudsperson Office recommends that the Department and UCHC routinely audit the RHU to ensure 1) all people with clinical symptoms have reliable methods to submit sick call requests, 2) all sick call requests are received by health care providers, and 3) all patients are transported to be seen by health care providers in a timely manner. Audits should result in corrective action where appropriate and track progress over time.
- 3. Set minimum standards for habitability of a prison housing unit.** The building utilized for the RHU at Northern State Prison has chronic plumbing problems that contribute to regular flooding of cells and, in some locations, pooling wastewater and sewage. The HVAC system provides inconsistent heating and cooling, dependent on the levels of smoke and drug use by some people housed there, causing repeated and extended periods of time in which indoor temperatures on the unit are unreasonably cold or hot. When temperatures are very hot in the RHU, people housed there cannot use fans or be provided with bottles of water, because of internal protocols that the Department has put in place to address misbehavior. These conditions persist, in part, because state law lacks meaningful standards on what makes a prison housing unit habitable. Additionally, without sufficient resources to build or procure habitable facilities, these conditions become the norm. The Ombudsperson Office recommends that lawmakers establish clear minimum standards for the habitability of prison housing units. The Office further recommends that more capital funding be prioritized for repairs, renovations, and new construction to ensure people are not housed in state buildings that do not meet minimum standards of habitability.
- 4. Mandate data reporting.** New Jersey's Isolated Confinement Restriction Act (ICRA) requires the Department to report on a quarterly basis the number of people held in isolated confinement as

well as all incidences of self-harm or suicide by people held in isolated confinement.²⁵ Because the Department of Corrections interprets the law in a manner that excludes people held in RHUs, there is no quarterly reporting on the number of people held in RHUs or on incidences of self-harm or suicide in an RHU. The Ombudsperson Office recommends that lawmakers mandate regular public reporting of this information, either by clarifying ICRA or adopting a separate piece of legislation aimed at creating transparency around RHUs.

²⁵ NJSA §30:4-82.11(e).