



Scanners That Could Catch Weapons Can't Be Used at Rikers

Sophisticated X-ray body scanners that could curb widespread smuggling of scalpels and razors at New York City's notorious Rikers Island jail have sat unused for years, shelved by a state law barring such devices that emit low doses of radiation.

The city instead is using weaker metal detectors that investigations have shown can allow blades to slip through if they are simply wrapped in duct tape.

"It's absurd," said Councilwoman Elizabeth Crowley, who chairs a legislative committee overseeing the correction department. "They have these scanners and they paid a lot of money for these scanners and they're not getting used."

City officials say they purchased the seven airport-style body scanners in 2012 and 2013 for more than \$1 million, putting them in operation at the jail complex for about a year before they learned of a state law that prohibits non-medical uses of machines that emit small doses of radiation. Federal law allows similar scanners to be used at airports and in some federal prisons.

Department of Correction Commissioner Joseph Ponte told legislators at a budget hearing last year that the machines, which were the subject of a handful of lawsuits by prisoners at Rikers, were pulled from service in early 2014.

Since then, they have sat in storage while the city lobbied lawmakers to try to pass legislation that would allow them to use the machines.

"They cite some law, but I don't know that any lawsuit or judge would say that the department is hurting somebody's physical well-being by allowing these scanners to be used," Crowley said. "I personally think they should use them with or without the state law."

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For now, the majority of screening points at the 10 Rikers' jails are equipped with walk-through metal detectors, known as magnetometers. But the commissioner of a city agency that has led a sprawling investigation into corruption in the city jail system says the machines can be easily tricked and have repeatedly failed to catch people who admitted smuggling weapons.

"There's no comparison," said Cameron Lindsay, a former federal prison warden who now works as a jail security consultant. "The body scanners are much better. The technology is exponentially better, and you can see the entire person's body without strip searching them."

A city report issued in February said that more than 2,200 weapons were recovered inside city jails last year and that the number of slashings and stabbings at city jails rose 66 percent from the prior year. In November, a correction officer was slashed across the face by an inmate wielding a scalpel and needed more than two dozen stitches to close the wound.

A Rikers Island correction officer was indicted last month after authorities said he smuggled seven scalpels that were stuffed inside a package of synthetic marijuana and wrapped with duct tape. The officer, Kevin McKoy, had told investigators he was able to smuggle scalpels into the jail previously by walking through the magnetometers undetected, Department of Investigation Commissioner Mark Peters said in announcing the charges.

McKoy has pleaded not guilty; his attorney has declined to comment on the case.

In 2014, a Department of Investigation probe found that an undercover investigator was able to smuggle a razor blade into the jails on Rikers Island in each of six attempts.

Ponte said the correction department is "taking aggressive steps to stem the flow of contraband," including increasing visitor searches and overhauling the process for recruiting

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correction officers.

The city says it has also purchased 10 new scanners that are designed to catch cellphones that may be smuggled into the jail and officials say those machines are also helpful in finding small wrapped weapons because of the sensitivity of the machines.

The city's top financial officer said the purchase of the body scanners was "an example of how a lack of due diligence can cost taxpayers money."

"The Department of Correction doesn't have to put these X-ray scanners up on eBay, but there's no point in having them sit there and depreciate down to nothing," New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer said.

Norman Seabrook, president of the union that represents rank-and-file correction officers, said union officials need to learn more about the body scanners to verify there are no health risks to officers who may be posted at the scanners every day.

This story has been corrected to show the Rikers Island correction officer was indicted last month, not earlier this month.

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