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Restrictive Housing Oversight Committee (RHOC) Meeting
Thursday, March 19, 2026
Via Microsoft Teams
DRAFT

I. CALL TO ORDER

Undersecretary Peck called the meeting to order at 11:06 AM.

Restrictive Housing Oversight Committee - Attendance		
Name	Present	Absent
Undersecretary Andrew Peck, Chair	X	
Kevin Flanagan	X	
Robert Fleischner, J.D.	X	
Hon. Geraldine Hines (resigned)		X
Tatum A. Pritchard, Esq.	X	
Kyle Pelletier	X	
Dr. Joanne Tsakas Barros, PhD, LMHC, CCHP	X	
Attorney Tenneriello, Esq.	X	
Dr. Henry, PhD, LICSW	X	
Sheriff Cocchi	X	
Hollie Matthews	X	

II. UPDATE FROM THE DOCUMENT REVIEW SUBCOMMITTEE

The committee received a brief update on the work of the Document Review Subcommittee, which consists of Hollie Matthews, Bonnie Tenneriello, and Dr. Brandy Henry. Hollie Matthews has been overseeing a co-op student who has been organizing the documents received from the facilities into a spreadsheet. The subcommittee reported that the student has pulled the information together, but there remains a significant volume of documentation to review.

Bonnie Tenneriello noted that assessing compliance with the committee’s document requests has been challenging. There are many blanks in the responses, which may be filled in as the subcommittee digs deeper, but it is hard to tell whether the committee has received everything it requested. She also noted that some facilities responded by sending large policy manuals covering many topics, making it difficult to isolate the specific Restrictive Housing policies requested. In some cases, it remains unclear whether a facility lacks a particular policy or simply did not provide it.

Hollie Matthews confirmed these observations once she was able to join the call, noting that there is a great deal of documentation to work through. The committee noted that the subcommittee currently lacks a designated chair.

III. REVIEW DRAFT SITE VISIT QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

A. Terminology and Definitions

Bonnie Tenneriello presented edits she had made to the draft site visit questionnaire. She explained that she had been unable to attend the February meeting and had followed up afterward with revisions consistent with suggestions she had raised at the January meeting. Her primary concern was that the questionnaire used the term “Restrictive Housing,” which is not the terminology used by most counties. She proposed using the broader term “Special Management Unit” (SMU), defining it as a unit that separates people from the general population due to a sanction or perceived risk.

Bob Fleischner suggested that when the committee receives a briefing from facility staff before visiting the units, staff will identify what they call their units, and the committee can substitute that terminology in place of SMU. He noted that facility-specific terminology would help ensure shared understanding during interviews.

Dr. Brandy Henry agreed with this approach, noting that incarcerated individuals are likely to use different terms than staff regardless, and that the important thing is to be clear about what the committee means and then adapt to whatever a given facility uses. She suggested simply asking each facility, “What do you call it here?”

Sheriff Cocchi concurred, noting that every facility and every county may use completely different terminology. He confirmed that the incarcerated population typically knows the technical term for each specific county’s units.

Discussion turned to whether the questionnaire is an internal document for the committee’s own use or would be shared with facilities. Tatum Pritchard, who drafted the initial version, explained that it was originally designed as an internal tool to provide uniformity in how committee members introduce themselves and their purpose, with the flexibility to paraphrase rather than read verbatim. Sheriff Cocchi suggested that as a courtesy, the committee should plan to share

the document with facilities so staff are aware of what topics will be discussed with incarcerated individuals, noting this is helpful for identifying potential sensitivities.

The committee ultimately agreed that rather than using “SMU” or “Restrictive Housing,” the questionnaire should use neutral language such as “this unit” or “here” when referring to the housing placement. This approach avoids definitional disputes and grounds the conversation in the specific unit being visited.

B. Scope of the Committee’s Mandate

Kyle Pelletier raised a concern about the committee’s mandate. She noted that some of the language in the questionnaire and discussion suggested the committee intended to explore units beyond those formally designated as Restrictive Housing, and cautioned that the committee had not fully resolved whether its mandate under Section 39G extends to non-general-population units that are not classified as Restrictive Housing. She suggested that the committee dedicate time at a future meeting to discuss this question, noting that she does not believe there is agreement among members on this point.

Sheriff Cocchi offered a similar perspective, cautioning that when the committee visits non-general-population units, some members may be approaching the visits with a presumption that these units constitute Restrictive Housing, even if the facilities do not classify them as such. He emphasized the importance of drawing a clear line based on what the Commonwealth has defined in statute. He noted that some non-general-population units, such as emergency stabilization units and mental health units, involve restrictions based on clinical needs and are managed under the care of clinicians, which is a different context than disciplinary Restrictive Housing.

Undersecretary Peck acknowledged the broader question but suggested it was a conversation for another meeting. Bonnie Tenneriello noted that the committee’s report had stated an interest in continuing to look at BMUs and SAUs as models being developed as alternatives to Restrictive Housing, suggesting the committee’s scope has included these units in practice.

C. Conditions Questions and Specificity

Bonnie Tenneriello proposed adding more specificity to the conditions questions in the “Life in Restrictive Housing” section, including quantifying privileges such as hours out of cell, canteen spending limits, and comparisons to general population conditions.

Dr. Brandy Henry suggested being more intentional with the question about time spent outside, noting the difference between how much time someone is offered versus how much they actually take. She recommended phrasing the question as “How much time are you offered outdoors?” rather than “How much time are you able to spend outside?” She also cautioned about asking incarcerated individuals to compare their conditions to general population, noting that GP can

look very different in each facility and individuals may not have the best global information for comparison.

Dr. Henry also flagged the use of the word “regular” in some questions (e.g., regarding access to showers), noting that it is subjective and the committee should aim for more objective phrasing, such as “How often do you have access to showers?”

D. Safety Question and IEP Question

Dr. Henry raised concerns about two specific questions: the IEP (Individualized Education Program) question and the “Do you feel safe to return to general population?” question. She noted uncertainty about the committee’s role if an interviewee reports feeling unsafe, and questioned what mechanism the committee would have for reporting safety concerns to security staff.

Sheriff Cocchi addressed the safety question, explaining that at the end of a Restrictive Housing stay, individuals must move back to general population and that is typically when they raise safety concerns. He noted that some individuals, particularly those with gang affiliations, may be more willing to share safety concerns with committee members than with security staff. He stated that any such information should be reported to the superintendent of the facility and assured the committee it would be addressed. He also described alternative housing units, no longer called “protective custody”, for individuals who cannot safely function in general population, offering more freedoms and privileges than Restrictive Housing.

Bob Fleischner recommended removing the safety question from the formal questionnaire but noted that it could naturally come up in conversation, in which case committee members should handle it as they would any disclosed concern. He referenced past experience conducting interviews in state facilities, where a clinician serving as an expert witness would ask the individual’s permission before reporting a safety concern to facility administration. He noted that no one had ever refused. He emphasized that the committee should tell interviewees at the outset that conversations are not confidential or privileged, that names will not be used in reports, and that information will be aggregated.

Regarding the IEP question, Tatum Pritchard explained that it was intended to identify individuals with learning disabilities, which people often do not think to mention when asked about health or psychiatric issues. Bob Fleischner supported leaving the IEP question in, noting that in his extensive experience conducting interviews in Restrictive Housing settings across the country, the IEP question frequently comes up and consistently yields positive and relevant information.

The committee agreed by consensus to leave the IEP question in and remove the “Do you feel safe?” question from the questionnaire.

E. Additional Suggestions

Sheriff Cocchi recommended that the committee ask each interviewee why they are in the unit, arguing this provides essential context. He noted that the answer may reveal whether the placement was disciplinary, related to a fight, assault, drugs, contraband, or potentially wrongful. He emphasized the importance of understanding the full picture, including how recently someone was placed, what happened, and what the programming and step-down process looks like during their stay.

Bob Fleischner supported this recommendation, noting that every interview he has conducted in state facilities included this question and that the answer sometimes takes up the entire interview.

Dr. Barros suggested adding a question about access to mental health treatment in the unit, following up on the existing health-related questions. She proposed asking individuals who report mental health issues what their experience has been accessing mental health treatment in the unit.

The committee agreed by consensus to finalize the questionnaire incorporating these edits.

IV. DISCUSSION OF SITE VISIT CADENCE AND LOGISTICS

Undersecretary Peck raised the question of establishing a regular cadence for site visits.

Sheriff Cocchi expressed frustration that a previously planned tour of the Hampden County facility had not taken place because no committee members attended on the scheduled date. He noted that the date had been set at the committee's request, his staff had been prepared, and not a single member showed up. He offered to schedule individual tours for every committee member, emphasizing his commitment to transparency and stating that facilitating oversight is part of the job for correctional leadership, not a burden.

Undersecretary Peck acknowledged the scheduling challenges and noted that committee members have full-time jobs that sometimes conflict with planned visits. He raised the concern that if only one or two members visit a facility, it could be problematic for the committee's work and credibility.

Sheriff Cocchi agreed, noting that from the sheriffs' perspective, having a larger number of committee members tour a facility carries more weight for future recommendations. He emphasized that if only one or two people visit, other sheriffs may question how the committee can vote on recommendations without having seen the facility firsthand.

Bonnie Tenneriello suggested targeting one county per month and reaching out to each sheriff now to avoid further delays. She recommended scheduling Hampden County in April and other counties in May and June.

Sheriff Cocchi asked Kevin Hall, (present in the meeting), to provide multiple date options for April. He offered to have Mr. Hall send dates directly to the committee, with dates available

every two weeks. Adrian noted that April 10th had already been discussed as a potential date, and the committee agreed to add additional options around that date.

The committee agreed on the following schedule: Hampden County in April (with multiple date options to be provided by Mr. Hall), and Essex and Worcester Counties in May and June. Undersecretary Peck noted that summer months (June, July, August) may be challenging for some members due to vacations and family obligations but encouraged flexibility.

V. MEMBER COMMENT

Bob Fleischner raised the recent release of the independent expert's report on suicides in DOC facilities, noting that it had been covered prominently on the front page of the Springfield Republican. He recalled that the committee had discussed this issue at a prior meeting and had agreed to wait until the independent expert's work was complete before taking it up. He stated that the report raises issues squarely within the committee's purview, even under the narrowest interpretation of its mandate, and includes significant discussion of the Behavioral Management Units (BMUs).

Bob Fleischner noted that the DOC had issued a press release outlining steps it intends to take in response to the report. He recommended that the committee request someone from DOC attend a future meeting to discuss the report and the implementation of its response plan, particularly as it relates to the BMUs. He also suggested that the report and the DOC's press release be circulated to the full committee.

Sheriff Cocchi strongly agreed, stating that the issue of suicide and self-harm in correctional institutions must be addressed and cannot be dealt with only after tragedies occur. He argued that every correctional institution in the Commonwealth should be expected to produce documentation of what they have done to eliminate pathways for self-harm, and that if a pathway is not eliminated after a prior incident and another person dies in the same manner, that second death is preventable and inexcusable. He called for post-incident after-action reviews and the systematic elimination of identified pathways.

Kyle Pelletier noted that she had been able to skim the report and identified two recommendations that closely overlap with recommendations in the RHOC's own annual report. Specifically, the independent expert's report addresses the treatment of substance use as primarily a security issue rather than a clinical one, and calls out the intersection of lack of clinical treatment and services with placement in Restrictive Housing as a barrier to care. She noted that a large number of the individuals reviewed in the report were intoxicated at the time of suicide, and suggested the committee consider how to incorporate these overlapping concerns through its future visits and reports.

Undersecretary Peck suggested that the committee use its April meeting to review the report collectively, identify the specific areas within the committee's purview, and then invite someone

from DOC to present at the May meeting on implementation steps. He emphasized the importance of being focused and strategic so the committee can have a productive conversation with DOC.

Bonnie Tenneriello noted a discrepancy between the DOC's press release, which states that the average stay in a BMU is 72 hours, and the BMU dashboard, which reports an average length of stay of approximately 14 days (7 days median in a recent quarter). Kyle Pelletier indicated she did not have the figure off the top of her head and suggested the discrepancy may relate to different metrics (e.g., average stay vs. average contact), recommending the committee use the quarterly dashboard data as the more reliable source.

VI. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mary Valerio addressed the committee, referencing the independent expert's report and noting its overlap with issues the committee has been discussing. She also referenced the Special Corrections Consolidation hearing, at which previously incarcerated individuals spoke about their experiences. She highlighted the testimony of an individual who had spent 28 years in prison before being exonerated and who described spending nine months in Restrictive Housing for a nonviolent offense.

Ms. Valerio referenced the Department of Justice report issued in September 2025, which included complaints about individuals in Restrictive Housing with mental health issues whose calls for help were being ignored. She noted that many reports call for more training and reassessment of who is placed in Restrictive Housing, but questioned whether there is sufficient accountability when staff fail to respond to individuals in crisis. She drew a comparison to mandated reporters in schools and hospitals and suggested the committee discuss this issue.

Sheriff Cocchi responded at length, acknowledging the validity of Ms. Valerio concerns while also contextualizing the challenges facing correctional institutions. He stated that if any agency failed to take action against a staff member who was flagrantly negligent in responding to an individual in crisis, he would be very surprised. He explained that collective bargaining protections sometimes limit the disciplinary options available, noting that retraining is sometimes the maximum permissible response when termination is not possible.

Sheriff Cocchi emphasized the connection between adequate funding and the ability to deliver on mandated reforms, warning that budget cuts would result in the loss of mental health clinicians, teachers, and programming—the very resources needed to improve conditions. He noted that there are more mental health clinicians in correctional institutions today than at any point in the past, but that they are the first positions cut when budgets are reduced. He urged Ms. Valerio and other advocates to support adequate funding for correctional institutions alongside their advocacy for reform.

Ms. Valerio reiterated that her concern was not primarily about funding but about individual accountability, arguing that a staff member who fails to respond to someone expressing suicidal ideation should face consequences regardless of the budget environment. She noted her extensive personal involvement with criminal justice reform and her experience dealing with unions in a prior career.

Kyle Pelletier clarified that any death or significant incident in a correctional facility is referred to the district attorney for independent investigation, and that under the agreement with the Department of Justice, all such incidents are reported to the DOJ as well.

VII. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The committee took up approval of the minutes from the January 15, 2025 meeting. It was confirmed that there was no February meeting.

Motion: To accept the minutes of January 15, 2025, as presented. Motion by Kyle Pelletier, seconded by Bonnie Tenneriello

Result: Minutes approved unanimously with two abstentions (Kyle Flanagan abstained, Dr. Barros not present for the vote).

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

Motion to adjourn: Motion from Kyle Pelletier and seconded by Bonnie Tenneriello.

Vote: Unanimous.