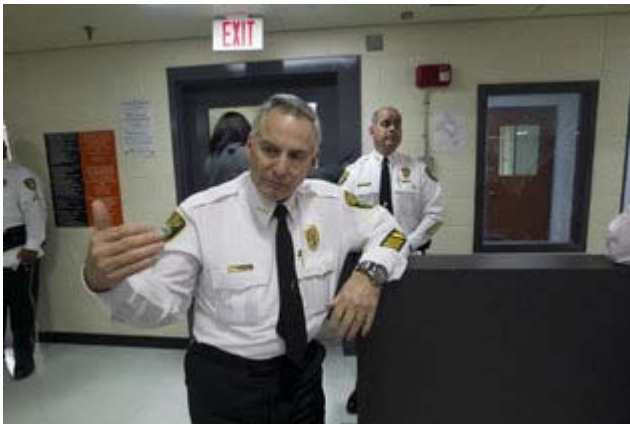


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Director of Miami-Dade's beleaguered jail system to retire

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Joe Rimkus Jr. / Miami Herald staff

Tim Ryan shows off the new centralized jail intake center at the Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center in June. Ryan will retire in January as director of the Miami-Dade corrections & rehabilitation department.

After six years leading Miami-Dade's beleaguered jail system, Tim Ryan will retire early next year, the county announced Friday.

His retirement comes with the corrections department under heightened scrutiny from federal authorities because of a recent series of inmate deaths, a major security breach and continued reports of shoddy conditions within the jails.

Ryan said his departure had been planned for months, and there was no pressure from county administrators for him to step down.

"I have a wife and she's explained to me that I've been in jail a long time," said Ryan, 65, who has spent more than four decades working in corrections across the country. "It's time to do some traveling, go see the grandkids and spend some time together."

Ryan said Friday that he is proud of his tenure in Miami-Dade, where he took over a corrections system plagued by aging, decrepit and overcrowded jail buildings. Budget cutbacks and poor political support didn't help matters.

Ryan said his staff worked hard in a difficult environment to keep the jail clean and to

get inmates proper medical care and back and forth to court.

“We’ve tried to keep it as safe as possible, not only for the community outside, but for the inmates inside who don’t want to be there,” he said.

He counted among his achievements: drastically reducing the inmate population, adding more surveillance cameras, overhauling the jail booking system and creating a video interview system for inmates and lawyers.

Ryan, the former head of the corrections in Orange County, was named the head of Miami-Dade’s jail system in December 2006. At the time, the department was reeling from the escape of a serial rapist that exposed a series of woes involving security at the jails.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, in a memo to commissioners Friday, praised Ryan and said his staff is preparing how to choose a successor.

Miami-Dade’s jail system has been plagued by controversy for decades.

In the mid-1970s, inmates filed suit over conditions at the county’s main jail, known as the Pretrial Detention Center, at 1321 NW 13th St. In 1984, a federal judge declared the poor conditions violated the constitutional rights of inmates. The lawsuit was finally settled after 25 years and some improvements.

But the escape of a serial rapist from Turner Guilford Knight in December 2005 exposed more problems, prompting the creation of another task force. It came back with a report detailing outdated facilities, poor training, lax security, too many job vacancies and a ballooning population of mentally ill inmates.

Twice, in 2004 and 2008, Miami-Dade grand juries blasted deplorable conditions at county jails.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice concluded a three-year probe, saying the nation’s eighth-largest jail system engaged in a “pattern and practice of constitutional violation” of the rights of inmates housed in deplorable living conditions under abusive, inadequate or limited care.

The department is now under federal monitoring “consent decree.”

In April, Miami-Dade County and Jackson Health System “which manages inmate care within the jails” agreed to a long and expensive list of improvements for treating inmates, particularly those who are mentally ill or suicidal.

As part of the deal, the county agreed to build a new mental-health facility, long championed by Judge Steve Leifman, to replace the notorious ninth-floor psychiatric

ward. So far, ground has not been broken for the facility.

But more scandals have continued in recent months, including the deaths of eight inmates, three of them on the ninth floor.

Jonathan Smith, the chief of the U.S. Dept of Justice's special litigation section, wrote jail officials last month to say it "was an alarming number of prisoner deaths."

The most high-profile: In July, a mentally ill patient named Joaquin Cairo was booked into Miami-Dade's psychiatric ward, then broke his pelvis and suffered internal bleeding. He claimed a fellow inmate propositioned him for sex, and then hurled him to the ground when he resisted. He later died, drawing a public scolding from Leifman.

In August, the director and doctor in charge of jail medical services resigned in the wake of news account of the deaths.

During the summer, a security gaffe caused the cell doors of a maximum security wing of the county's Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center to open suddenly. In an inmate scuffle that ensued, one man hurled himself off the second-story of the wing, severely injuring his legs.

The recent controversies spurred DOJ to send the letter last month to the county demanding that officials "develop a plan" to address the security breach.

Ryan on Friday said he has welcomed the DOJ monitoring as way of improving a department often misunderstood by the public.

"We want this to be an ongoing professional, model organization," he said.