Denver’s auditor isn’t happy with the way the Denver Sheriff Department is handling safety at its jails

An audit conducted over a six-month period highlighted several issues, including concerns about handcuffing inmates.

Inside Denver’s downtown Detention Center, Oct. 16, 2018. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

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Denver City Auditor Timothy M. O’Brien is asking the Denver Sheriff Department to take action to better protect the public, staff and inmates following an audit released Thursday that looked into the department’s safety practices in jails.

The audit, conducted in partnership between the auditor’s office and the Sheriff Department over the past six months, called the department’s approach to risk management “fragmented” and said it used practices that don’t align with national leading standards. O’Brien said in a release that the department “lacks a comprehensive and systematic approach to identifying risks” and ensuring the safety of deputies and inmates. The release also said the department doesn’t have an adequate response system in place for assaults, sexual assaults or use-of-force incidents.

O’Brien added that taking action to protect the public, staff and the inmates begins with “having a comprehensive, clear, and consistent plan to respond to incidents and prevent them from happening.”

“The real point here is that the current restraint practices are inconsistent and not working, as witnessed by my own audit team,” O’Brien said in the release. “The Sheriff Department says what it does now is adequate, but the evidence in this audit report suggests otherwise.”

The Sheriff Department — which operates and manages the Downtown Detention Center and the County Jail — said in a release they agree with the focus areas the city auditor chose to focus on.

But they said they had “concerns with the correlations made to prison standards,” adding that jails are managed differently than prisons.

“We value transparency and accountability and welcome review of our service delivery,” Sheriff Patrick Firman said in a release. “To ensure continuous improvement and sustainable change, we have also developed a cohesive, comprehensive data management practice that supports safety and contributes to our decision-making process on a daily basis.”

The audit concluded there are certain risks, like the jails’ makeup and staff turnover, that are out of the department’s control.

O’Brien cited problems with the way inmates are restrained. According to the release, during one incident observed by the audit team, a high-risk inmate at a Denver jail was handcuffed with his hands in front of his body. The audit team found that to be common practice, despite recommendations from most other sheriff departments suggesting cuffing inmates behind the back in most cases.

An additional incident observed by the audit team involved an inmate who was handcuffed in front of his body before reaching out and grabbing a deputy’s hand. The inmate was able to grab the deputy’s wrist, according to the release, which led to a use-of-force incident.

The audit found deputies respond on average of five incidents per day. They include assaults, sexual assaults or use of force.

“The Sheriff Department disagrees with our recommendation to align restraint policies with leading standards,” the release from the auditor’s office said. “The department refuses to change its handcuffing practices and claims front-handcuffing is a safe and adequate technique despite the reported incidents noted in the audit.”

Other issues the audit cites include:

- Intake and classification are still not up to par for national leading practices, despite this being the subject of a previous report.
- The department is not photographing pictures of tattoos, scars or other marks suggesting potential gang affiliations.
- The department’s classification process, which determines an inmate’s risk to determine the appropriate confinement, isn’t being reviewed as often as it should be. The auditor suggests without proper overview, some deputies override classification systems for some inmates, which could lead to more incidents.

To read the full audit, visit the Denver Auditor’s website.