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SENIOR CORRECTIONS OFFICER JOEL MERCADO PLEADS GUILTY TO TWO COUNTS OF OFFICIAL MISCONDUCT

Hunterdon County Prosecutor Anthony P. Kearns, III, announced the guilty plea of Joel Mercado, age 38, of Lyndhurst, New Jersey. Mr. Mercado pled guilty to two counts of official misconduct. His guilty plea stems from his employment as a Senior Corrections Officer employed by the State of New Jersey and assigned to the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, New Jersey's only prison for female inmates.

Joel Mercado admitted during his guilty plea before the Honorable Angela F. Borkowski, J.S.C., that he had sexual intercourse with two different inmates within the time period of February 2013 and October 2015. The sexual intercourse occurred on the housing unit where he was assigned to work and where the inmates resided. As a result of his guilty plea, he is facing three years in prison. He must also forfeit his employment and pension with the State of New Jersey.

Joel Mercado was arrested in May of 2017 by Detectives from the Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office's Special Victims Unit and members of the New Jersey Department of Corrections Special Investigations Division. He was arrested as part of an on-going investigation into sexual abuse of inmates.

Joel Mercado joins the ranks of four other individuals employed at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women recently convicted of official misconduct based on sexual acts with inmates. Institutional Trade Instructor Joel Herscap was sentenced to three years in prison in January 2017. Four months later Senior Corrections Officer Thomas Seguire was also sentenced to three years in prison. In May 2018 Senior Corrections Officer Jason Mays was convicted at trial of two counts of official misconduct, one count of sexual assault, one count of criminal sexual contact and one count of engaging in a pattern of official misconduct. Mays was sentenced to 16 years in prison, of which he must serve 10 years before being eligible for parole. Senior Corrections Officer Ahnwar Dixon pled guilty to official misconduct and is awaiting sentence. A sixth Corrections Officer, Brian Ambrose, was acquitted at trial of official misconduct and sexual assault allegations involving one victim, but he is currently awaiting trial on a different matter involving co-defendant Senior Corrections Officer Ronald Coleman in which both are

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charged with conspiracy to commit sexual assault and official misconduct. Ronald Coleman is also charged with sexual assault in relation to two separate female inmates in that matter.

Prosecutor Kearns stated, "We have in our society a system of punishing those who violate our laws, and when imprisonment is the punishment, it is our corrections officers that must carry out the duty of ensuring the welfare, safety and security of the inmates they are employed to supervise. All inmates have a right to be safe within the institutions where we as a society demand they be detained. All inmates should be free of sexual abuse regardless of their crime. The public trust is violated and everyone is betrayed when a sworn law enforcement officer violates the oath he or she has vowed to uphold. "

Prosecutor Kearns noted "those sentiments are underscored because at the time of his arrest on these charges Joel Mercado was functioning as an academy instructor at the New Jersey Department of Corrections academy for in-coming recruits. Part of the curriculum taught to new recruits by Joel Mercado involved New Jersey's law which prohibits any form of sexual contact between officers and inmates as well as compliance with a federal law enacted in 2003 aimed at eliminating prison rape called the Prison Rape Elimination Act."