

Another plea to hold the acronyms

First, a technical distinction: an acronym is pronounced as a word (“scuba” = self-contained underwater breathing apparatus); an initialism is pronounced letter by letter (“IBM”). Informally, “acronym” is often used for both.

I take my example from a case with nine of them — too many to list in this introduction. And that’s not counting a bunch of unnecessary parentheticals, such as Brian Sullivan (“Sullivan”) and New York City Board of Correction (the “Board”).

Four initialisms appear in the excerpted paragraph below:

- DOC = New York City Department of Corrections
- ACCF = Albany County Correctional Facility
- COs = unnamed correctional officers
- ESU = Emergency Services Unit (introduced for the first time in the paragraph)

The only one I might keep is DOC, because it is longish and used so often in the opinion. ACCF can be shortened to Albany Facility — words, not an initialism — without any

confusion. What about “COs”? Plaintiffs sued, among others, New York City, Albany County, and a number of unnamed city and county correctional officers, the “COs.” Those “COs” become “City Officers” and “Albany Officers” in the revision. For clarity, when they are first mentioned in the opinion, instead of creating an initialism, the opinion could have said “unnamed correctional officers (‘DOC Officers’ or ‘Albany Officers’).” As for “ESU,” if those officers must be separately identified, then spend a couple of words: “DOC Emergency-Services Officers.”

I’m not the first and won’t be the last to decry the proliferation of acronyms in legal and official writing. They are a prime example of false economy. Rather than speed the reader along, they create a bumpy road, as the reader takes a split second to remember what each one stands for. If an acronym is widely known — “FBI” or “CDC,” for instance — fine; use it. But there’s no need for newfangled ones at every turn.

ORIGINAL *(citations to the allegations in the complaint omitted)*

Upon arrival at ACCF, the detainee is subjected to a “routine of torture.” He is escorted to the intake area of the ACCF by DOC Emergency Services Unit (“ESU”) Corrections Officers (“COs”) — the New York City COs who transported him from Rikers to Albany. There, he is handed over to the “Green Team” — a group of ACCF COs wearing paramilitary uniforms. The detainee is transferred from DOC handcuffs to Albany handcuffs, and ACCF COs take him to a booking cell. He is given a series of arbitrary and increasingly convoluted commands to follow; every time he gets confused, he is punched. Then, the detainee’s cuffs are removed and the Green Team, directed by Defendant Torrisi, assaults him. The DOC ESU officers who brought the detainee to Albany are often present inside the intake area while this assault occurs, and can see and hear what is happening.

REDLINE

Upon arriving at the Albany facility, the detainee is subjected to a “routine of torture.” He is escorted to the intake area by DOC Officers from the Emergency Services Unit — the ones who transported him from Rikers to Albany. There, he is handed over to the “Green Team” — a group of Albany Officers wearing paramilitary uniforms. The detainee is transferred from DOC handcuffs to Albany handcuffs, and the Albany Officers take him to a booking cell. He’s given a series of arbitrary and increasingly convoluted commands to follow. Every time he gets confused, he is punched. Then the handcuffs are removed, and the Green Team, directed by Defendant Torrisi, assaults him. The DOC [Emergency-Services] Officers who brought the detainee to Albany are often present inside the intake area while this assault occurs, and can see and hear what is happening.



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