

NYC buildings commissioner wants inspectors to make arrests, carry guns

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Photo by Michael Appleton/Mayoral Photography Office

The head of New York City's buildings department wants to grant inspectors the power to make arrests and even carry guns following complaints from agency staffers who say they've been attacked on the job, according to an email obtained by Gothamist.

Department of Buildings Commissioner James Oddo is pushing for state legislation that would allow the agency to designate inspectors and other employees as "peace officers," [a civil service title](#) that would give them certain law enforcement capabilities.

Building inspectors routinely enter private residences and construction sites to check safety conditions and issue violations, and sometimes face the wrath of angry property owners or site managers. The agency currently instructs inspectors to immediately leave the area and report assaults to the police or report "aggressive" confrontations to a supervisor.

In an email to staff on Tuesday, Oddo provided an update on a bill introduced last month by State Sen. Jessica Scarcella-Spanton, a Staten Island Democrat, that could allow inspectors to “make arrests, use physical force in the course of fulfilling their duties, and carry firearms provided they have the appropriate license.” Oddo said he called Scarcella-Spanton and she agreed to introduce the measure, according to the email shared with Gothamist.

The [bill](#) would also make assaulting a DOB employee a felony. Oddo said in his email to staff that he heard from inspectors who were “physically attacked by members of the public, simply for doing their jobs.”

“We all agree that situations like that are unacceptable, and more must be done to protect the safety of DOB employees out in the field,” Oddo wrote.

Scarcella-Spanton said her bill would allow inspectors to “protect themselves should a harrowing situation arise.”

DOB spokesperson Andrew Rudansky said the agency does not intend to arm its inspectors if state lawmakers approve the peace officer bill, despite Oddo's emails to staff.

Rudansky did not provide details about how often inspectors are attacked on the job each year or whether the agency tracks the number of confrontations. But he said employees report being assaulted multiple times a year.

“Our field work can lead to contentious situations; we recognize the need for legislation to ensure that every DOB inspector feels safe on the job,” Rudansky said. “Making it a felony to attack one of our members and introducing an agency peace officer program would help protect our staff, and would bring DOB in line with other enforcement agencies here in the city and around the state.”

The mayor’s office did not respond to specific questions about the proposal.

The idea of giving civilian agencies policing powers and the right to carry guns has faced controversy in the past.

Glenn Corbett, the chair of the Department of Public Management at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said building inspectors enter risky situations with angry people.

"DOB is like the forgotten public safety agency, but it has such an important role and they're dealing with people who are not happy," Corbett said. "Inspecting buildings can be dangerous."

But Corbett said he thinks the idea of giving inspectors policing powers needs more analysis, especially if a new law could empower DOB employees to carry guns. He recommended sending teams of inspectors into potentially risky situations or coordinating with police.

"There's a real need for this, but it requires deeper study," he said. "Is there a safer way to do this?"