

A CALL TO ARMS: CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

As one of the state's longest held prisoners, I am frequently asked a variety of questions relating to the history of Illinois' prison system by fellow convicts, Department of Corrections' employees, and the individuals whom I correspond with. One of the most often asked queries I receive is a request to compare the present day penal system with that of 1967, when I first arrived. At first blush, one would make an assumption that life on the inside has to be markedly more humane and rehabilitative, with "Shawshank Redemption" style rapes and beatings but a distant memory, with educational and vocational programming available to all at the state's prisons; however, nothing could be further from the truth.

Within a week after being placed into Stateville's general population, I was called to the college administrator's office, where I was presented with a smorgasbord of college classes from which I could choose, and shortly thereafter, I was attending my first class. For those mechanically inclined, a large scale vocational program was there to teach useful skills one could use upon their release, such as auto mechanics and body repair, electronics, and culinary arts. For the artistically inclined, art and music instructional programs abounded, and the United States Jaycees had been allowed to form a chapter within the walls; they in turn were teaching a variety of leadership training programs. In essence, one could build a foundation upon which an individual could improve their likelihood for success upon release, if they chose to do so.

To ascertain the extent of rehabilitative programming now available within the prison system, I would like to direct your attention to the Department of Corrections' latest Annual Report. In the past, the Department used this publication as a vehicle to convince the public of its effort to successfully rehabilitate offenders; no more. According to Stateville's Warden Kenneth R.

Briley, "there are no college courses available for Level 1 inmates, only mandatory basic education and G.E.D. preparation classes", while Warden Donald S. Young appeared pleased to announce that the Shawnee Corr. Center has seen a "termination of certain recreational activities such as the runner's club, arts and craft program, chess and drama clubs and intramural programming." Although such a diminution of services comes as no surprise to those of us on the inside, these reductions in programming were previously hidden from the public; no longer. Although the Department's "Mission Statement" indicates that it "maintains programs to enhance the success of offenders' reentry into society", it would appear that Director Snyder's attention lies elsewhere. The press has reported that Snyder has spent \$7,000 for the purchase of dishes and silverware for top brass' use when they visit prisons, and an additional \$4,700 to equip 11 state vehicles with CD players. According to USA Today, he was chastised for using a state plane to attend a political rally. As a cost-cutting measure, he ordered all state prisons to issue less toilet paper to inmates. Probably the most indicative of the state of the prison system today, the legislature has indemnified the Department of Corrections against suit, in the event that an inmate attempted to hold it liable for failure to provide rehabilitative programming.

The issue before us then is, what can we as "C" numbers do to rectify this situation? As we are spread out all over the state, some of the issues, such as the loss of educational opportunities, apply to nearly all of us, while other problems exist only at a facility or two. Whereas many of the younger men and women are unaware of the commitment made in the past to rehabilitate us, our memories are still fresh, our minds strong. It is our responsibility to educate both the public and this subsequent generation of prisoners how Illinois' prison

system is not only failing to meet their needs, but appears to be intentionally programming them to reoffend in the future. Unlike the federal prison system, which gradually reduces an inmate's security rating, so that the person can spend his last few months in a work release program, the odds against a "C" number prisoner ever being allowed into such a program are next to zero.

The question then before us is what can we do to reverse this course of action? To begin with, we can correspond with those individuals who are in a position to affect the program implementation process, such as the legislative committee in charge of overseeing the Department's programs; additionally, we need to continuously write critical but objective articles which outline the Department's shortcomings, and present them to sympathetic journalists for publication. Lastly, we need to recognize that each and every one of us is viewed by the Department of Corrections for the contributions our skills bring to a prison. By working as an electrician, carpenter or plumber for a monthly pittance, we save the state upwards of \$50,000 for that one particular job. Every skilled assignment we fill allows the prison system to hire another unskilled security guard, whose salary now approaches \$40,000 a year for a job requiring only a high school diploma and a driver's license, while contributing nothing to the rehabilitative process.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." Let our example attract brothers and sister to our spirit, and they will take up the cause. Now is the time to shake off the chains of apathy, and become a catalyst for change.