

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

February 5, 2014

11 X 15 Campaign Update

I have posted notices about the 11X15 campaign and the efforts of a coalition of church organizations to reduce the prison population to 11,000 by 2015. Their current initiative is focused on persuading Governor Walker to require the parole commission to release prisoners on parole. As their most recent press release states:

"There are hundreds of men and women in prison in Wisconsin who are, as a matter of law, eligible for parole. Many of them have been in prison for more than 20 years. They were sentenced to prison at a time when judges allowed the Parole Board to determine when people convicted of a crime could safely return to the community. In 1999, the law was changed: under new 'Truth in Sentencing,' parole was abolished, and people sent to prison must do every day of the sentence imposed by the court. That is now the law, but for hundreds of men and women still in prison, the law was different and the assumptions of judges were different. The law and judges recognized the possibility that some people could and would change in positive ways while in prison. That's why the law allowed for parole."

"If 1000 people who are legally eligible to be released could be returned home, the state would save more than \$30,000,000 a year."

"We are calling on Governor Walker to appoint an Ombudsman, selected by the Chief Justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, with the authority to insure that those people who are eligible for parole are not lost, lingering and overlooked in an expensive and unjust bureaucracy. Within six months, the person appointed shall issue a public report on the number of people legally eligible to go home and the progress that has been made in reducing that number."

This is a particularly difficult goal to reach as the two government stakeholders - the governor and the parole commission - would have to act against their own interests for it to succeed.

Governor Walker is a right-wing ideologue who gets the majority of his campaign donations from wealthy out-of-state Republicans who are putting up their money to support what Walker stands for. That includes a "lock 'em up and throw away the key" mentality which prohibits any early release of prisoners. When Governor Walker was in the state assembly, he was one of the main sponsors of the current sentencing scheme which bars virtually all early release of prisoners.

Governor Walker also has presidential aspirations. He cannot afford a "Willie Horton"-style incident to ruin his chances in a general election. Neither can he afford to be seen as soft on crime in the Republican primaries where only the most conservative ideologue has a chance of getting the nomination.

The parole commission is an aging dinosaur whose usefulness is passing. The state currently spends \$1 million per year to fund the parole commission and lavishes exorbitant salaries on commission members. The number of prisoners who get parole hearings is steadily shrinking. Each released prisoner brings the commission closer to elimination which will put those over-paid commission members out of work. They will never find another job which pays so much money for so little work. I estimate that commission members make about \$60,000 or more per year, plus numerous perks such as a state vehicle to drive. If the commission members would actually start following the law as it was intended, they would soon find themselves unemployed.

The members of WISDOM and I both agree that with God's help, anything is possible. Even with the opposition of Governor Walker and the parole commission, I believe we can change their hearts and make progress on getting all of us old law prisoners a chance of release on parole.

If you would like to help, contact either of the following:

Dave Liners at wisdomwi@sbcglobal.net

or Peg Swan at Pgswan3@yahoo.com

Dave Liners is spearheading the WISDOM effort and Peg Swan runs the Forum For Understanding Prisons and is active in prison reform.