

TEAR DOWN THIS TEMPLE...  
The Fall Of The Norfolk Rehabilitation Model

by Timothy J. Muise

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been the leader in many aspects of social reform over the years. Our "Boston Tea Party" spirit ran through many of the efforts to advance the cause of the human condition in politics (only state not to vote for Richard Nixon), abolition of slavery (the hub of the underground railroad), gender equality (we had a woman secretary of public safety, attorney general, and commissioner of correction all at the same time), and in the 1970's into the early 1980's we had one of the most successful corrections systems in the history of American penology. One reason for the success in corrections (lowest recidivism rate, most successful furlough and parole system, low prisoner/per-capita population) was due to the "Norfolk Rehabilitation Model" which was a prison where the concept of "community" and "social responsibility" ran through all it's operations.

Prisoners housed at MCI Norfolk were encouraged to start their own businesses (through the avocations program), to play a role in the daily operations of the prison (through the Norfolk Inmate Council), and to build a sense of accomplishment and belonging through the vast array of cultural programs and family connectivity activities which allowed the incarcerated to work for that "quest for self-realization" that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall used as the legal definition of "rehabilitation". Norfolk produced men like Malcolm X who changed the face of our society. If Malcolm X could see MCI Norfolk today he would surely be rolling in his grave.

Corrections in Massachusetts has gone from a concept in social reform to a jobs program for state employees. 70% of the corrections budget is spent on salaries while education and programming receives less than 2% of the budgeted funds. Do the math: jobs are the top priority.

MCI Norfolk has been dismantled as that shining beacon on the hill of corrections as it once was. No more family programs; quite the opposite as family programs are shunned and ridiculed in the press even as the department of correction touts "Family Reunification" as one of it's top priorities. Avocations are no more and men are forced to leave prison destitute and real paupers who are subjected to a 50% to 60% recidivism rate, which is more than double that of the rate in the HeyDay of the Norfolk Model. Instead of building men up and teaching hope, the Norfolk of 2016 tears men down with constant petty beratements and daily injections of hopelessness. They no longer place the emphasis on the "I Can" philosophy, as that does not promote job, and the focus today is on the "square peg in round hole" defeatism of the modern prison industrial complex. Public safety has been foregone for the jobs program and our children and many other innocents die at the hands of gun violence out of control; a symptom of the tearing down of the temple.

Due to the nature of prisons, their operations being hidden behind high walls and razor wire fences, many in the public do not know just how large of a role the failure of the modern corrections systems plays in their daily lives. When men were "built up" at the old Norfolk Rehabilitation Model recidivism in Massachusetts was 24%. Stories of "repeat offenders" and "habitual criminals" were few and far between. Under the new "jobs program" system it seems each and every year we have a violent criminal who was created in prison. Low level drug dealers come back to prison as murderers and it is a direct result of the dismantling of the Norfolk Model.

What must happen in order to make Massachusetts the leader in criminal justice reform is that we must go back to using the original concept of the Norfolk Rehabilitation Model to produce men and women who will be productive members of society upon their release from prison. We must build folks up, allow them to go on that quest for self-realization, and stop listening to the "tough on crime" rhetoric which has made us (the U.S.) the largest incarcerater in the world. We know the answers and must urge our lawmakers to employ them. We must turn a deaf ear to the madness spewed from the guard's union and prison profiteers. We must stand on the principles of this great nation and truly afford men and women a second chance.

Jesus talked about the "tearing down of the temple", in making reference to his earthly journey. He vowed to build it back up in three days, which he did. We must build the Norfolk Rehabilitation Model back up or the world will surely perish just as in the time of the Savior. Let's save the system. Let's save the Norfolk Rehabilitation model. To get involved in the fight for commonsense criminal justice reform please contact me at:

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