

## BROKEDOWN PALACE

by Timothy J. Muise

What is corrections? Not the draconian punishment version of corrections that has been portrayed in movies like The Birdman of Alcatraz or Cool Hand Luke, but the modern progressive definition that amature society such as ours must expect. Now my limited education and experience tells me that is supposed to have something to do with the reform of errants. The term errants may not be used toomuch in today's shortcut world, but basically errants are men and women, who for some underlying reason, have strayed from the acceptable behaviors and rules of the world we live in. When one of these errants breaks the law they are sent to prison not just for punishment but for "correction". To be taught a new way.

Core causes of crime are easily definable but not as easily addressed. Drug abuse, mental health issues, poverty, racism, classism and moral value decay all play a role. In many cases it is a combination of these core issues that comprise the make up of an errant. In order to afford this errant the best opportunity at reform you must employ the best of the best. To treat the most complicated demographic of social failure you need trained and accredited experts, and even then you have a tall task. Of course highly skilled employees like this can be expensive. Doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and licensed social workers all deserve fair compensation. When one raises the need for these experts in corrections it is always the financial hurdle which is raised to block the plan. On the surface it may make sense, but it is in fact a fantasy-the fantasy that we cannot afford these trained professionals to rehabilitate errants.

The last Department of Correction budget was 521 MILLION dollars! The vast majority of this money went to the salaries of line officers and their supervisors. The DOC houses just over 10 thousand prisoners and employs 5100 persons, 4000 of which are guards! This 1 guard for 2 prisoners ratio is so out of line with other prison systems, much more violent and unruly systems, that it is hard to believe that the citizens of the commonwealth are not outside of the prisons with torches and pitchforks like it was the Frankenstein castle. There should be widespread outrage, but instead there is widespread panic at any perceived soft-on-crime attitude. This fake panic comes as a result of a media propaganda campaign that rises to Hitleresque levels. Get the peoples blood boiling with fear and they will shell out their tax dollars. The propaganda machine that is the guards union has mastered this art. They have formed a voting base, claim "understaffing" as the basis for every negative incident that ever happens in the corrections system, and clamor for more guards and money as the solution for crime and social failure. As a close friend of mine would say, "This is ludicrous!".

In Florida the law mandates that there be no less than 1 guard for every 12 prisoners. Alabama had 1 guard for every 15 prisoners for many, many years. The ratio in Massachusetts is so out of line with the rest of the nation that it is indicative of a much greater failing here in the commonwealth. The actual safety of the public

comes a distant second to the fatcat paychecks of prison administrators and 30 plus year union employees. This prison industrial complex mentality further endangers the public as it does nothing to cure errants. It is the diametric opposition to what that definition we spoke of herein should be. The purposeful over-classification of prisoners keeps guards employed but does nothing to prepare these prisoners for their eventual return to society. Men need the step down system of minimum security housing and work release facilities in order to be afforded a chance at success. Union officials despise these types of facilities because they require minimal staffing.

Drastic budgetary restructuring must be undertaken affording the lions share of salary dollars to be directed to rehabilitation professionals while reducing line staff through the use of minimum security and work release facilities. Clinical initial evaluations of prisoner needs must be followed up with strict adherence and recommendation enforcement. The long term budget savings will be dramatic, but more importantly the protection these measures afford the public will help to heal social ills, reduce susceptibility to core crime issues, and allow the moral conviction of the populace to strengthen and heal.

We have let perception outweigh reality. The nation thinks that our state had the worst furlough program, because of the Dukakis election and Willie Horton hype (thanks Lee Atwater), but the truth is that the Massachusetts furlough system at the time of Willie Horton was the most successful to ever exist. Men and women, errants, were allowed to heal, decompress and prepare for their return to society. Hope instead of hopelessness. It made the store owner on the corner and the lone pedestrian on the dark street safer. Cost effectiveness balanced with responsible treatment. The time has come for this again.

When I look at MCI Norfolk, which was once the most progressive and successful prison in the country, I now see a "Brokedown Palace". I see it as that because the old Grateful Dead song pops into my head. Jerry Garcia sings, "Goin' to leave this brokedown palace, on my hands and knees I will roll, roll, roll. Make myself a bed by the waterside, In my time, in my time, I will roll, roll, roll." I hope when that time does come for me I am not forced to make my bed by the waterside. We need to make this system the national leader once again. Massachusetts pride and the spirit of Concord & Lexington must blossom under the hot sun of taxpayer outrage. Please contact the following grassroots organizations to help make this happen;