

A R O L E I N T H E I R O W N D E S T I N Y .

T H E N O R F O L K L I F E R S ' G R O U P
P R I S O N E R R E E N T R Y I N I T I A T I V E

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A ROLE IN THEIR OWN DESTINY
THE NORFOLK LIFERS' GROUP PRISONER REENTRY INITIATIVE

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PART I

THE SYSTEM IS BROKEN.....

The system is broken in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and it is not just the corrections system we refer to. It is a multi-faceted problem that has for so long been demonized with a "no quick fix" label. This defeatist attitude has some strong basis for its existence, but we believe it has proven to be more of a self-fulfilling prophecy than a reality. This prophecy has manifested, in large part, due to the systemic failure to recognize what truly works and who can best implement such. A major element of that failure is the fact that the most widely available, economically sound, and proven effective resource has been ignored. That abundant resource is the prisoner himself.

Massachusetts has an odd dynamic when it comes to corrections. We have a relatively low state prison population, around 11,408, with an incarceration rate of about 218 persons out of every 100,000.^{/1} We also have here in the Commonwealth a very large tax dollar base, as opposed to many states across the nation, and this propelled our corrections budget into the stratosphere during the technology boom of years gone by. The current corrections budget in Massachusetts hovers around \$550 Million dollars with an average per prisoner/per year cost of about \$43,000.00.^{/2} Between 1987 and 2007 the overall corrections budget (this includes state & county facilities) increased by 127% (compare this with the higher education budget which only increased by 21%),^{/3} and from 1998 to 2008 the overall corrections budget increased from \$611,256,783 to \$947,792,000.^{/4} (The \$550 Million referred to earlier is the state prison only budget)

If these astronomical costs and increased staffing levels [the DOC currently reports staffing levels of about 2.86 employees for every one (1) prisoner].^{/5} had reduced crime rates, recidivism

rates and moved public safety protection forward in a commensurate fashion, you would hear no outcry from the taxpayer about the high cost of housing prisoners. Sadly, that is not the case.

The recidivism rate in this state holds somewhere between 39% and 44%, depending which demographical study you cite,^{/6} Some studies even point to 1 in 2 released prisoners returning to prison within 3 years after release.^{/7} The longer a prisoner is held increases the chance for recidivism, as does the security level at which the prisoner spends the lions share of his time. Higher security housing equals higher recidivism.^{/8}

Programming in the state prison system is not working. A recent study showed that male prisoners who had been paroled to the streets and DID NOT attend the DOC's reentry program came back to prison at a rate of 38%. It also showed that male prisoners who were paroled to the street but DID attend the DOC's reentry program came back to prison at a rate of 55%! A 17% HIGHER rate!^{/9} It was also recently reported that 52% of recidivists had completed the Correctional Recovery Academy during their previous incarceration.^{/10} This is the DOC's "all eggs in one basket" treatment program geared to address the substance abuse needs of prisoners, in a state where 81% of the prison population reports substance abuse issues.^{/11} These two glaring failures are only the tip of the iceberg but they clearly display that the system is broken and the throw dollars at it approach does not work.

Other important factors in the systemic failure are not as easily supported by data, but are just as important and we would be remiss in not including them. A much too powerful guard's union makes it almost impossible to properly apply staff in a manner which is conducive to rehabilitation. Administrators who are entrenched in the "tough on crime" attitudes behind the high recidivism rates are absolutely unreceptive to any type of real progressive approach. This is why all new ideas fail. A general attitude that nothing will work without more money, more staff, and

more prisons blocks out the openness to move into the future and employ progressive techniques. We feel we have a viable, immediately workable, and economically feasible plan that can drastically reduce recidivism and afford men/women reentry assistance that will keep them out of prison permanently, while providing them with the self-esteem and self-worth to be truly productive members of society.

PART II

THERE IS HOPE.....

There is certainly hope for the corrections system here in the Commonwealth. Public opinion on corrections reform attitudes is not what media bias portrays it to be. In a national poll voters favored a corrections system with rehabilitative services over a punishment based system by an 8 to 1 margin.^{/12} 70% also favored services for prisoners even after release.^{/13} This may not get reported on FOX 25 news, but here in Massachusetts 75% of the respondents in a recent survey believed that the prison system should provide treatment, employment and job training.^{/14} The public knows in order for prisoners to succeed, to successfully reintegrate, they must be able to address core issues while in prison and properly prepare for their ultimate release. In this state about 95% of all prisoners will someday be released.^{/15}

A 1% reduction in the recidivism rate would reduce the yearly overall corrections budget by 4.3 Million dollars.^{/16} A 1% reduction in the state prison release only recidivism rate would save the taxpayer 1.3 million dollars.^{/17} These figures are in "corrections only" savings and do not take into consideration the additional savings from reduced crime and other social issue reductions. With these types of drastic reductions so eminently achievable, and in light of the fact that by a ratio of 2 to 1 the public believes

that addressing social problems should be the favored approach rather than more law enforcement, prisons, police and judges,^{/18} an effort is mandated by public opinion to not only find, but immediately implement solutions. These solutions are not hidden away in dark corners, they are alive and begging for a chance in the form of motivated and well prepared individual prisoners and groups.

Today almost all prisoner to resource coordination is done by the prisoner himself. Contacting halfway houses, setting up outside counseling, and attempting to build support systems is all done by the individual, sometimes with assistance from prison groups or organizations (prisoner run groups and organizations) but almost never with any assistance from the department of correction. Today's successful parole plan, reentry package, or residential program connection is done without any DOC involvement. The Norfolk Lifers' Group spends a great deal of its time assisting men in these pursuits, men with limited educations and abilities, but we are extremely hindered by the corrections system itself. If the roadblocks to our expanding our efforts in this area are removed, and we are allowed to effectively assist men with obtaining the reentry services they require, we can reduce the rate of recidivism dramatically, while saving the state 1.3 million dollars for every reduced percentage point.^{/19} It can be done, and at no cost to the taxpayer. The public demands improvement and we will deliver if allowed.

PART III

THE SOLUTION IS....

The solution is to use prisoners to assist other prisoners in securing services. This is already done on a daily basis in the prison system but at a minimal level due to restrictions and counter-productive prison policies. MCI Norfolk is a perfect

testing ground for such an initiative. The Norfolk Lifers' Group has put together a comprehensive listing of wide ranging resources for reentry which are up to date and tested. We have secured the assistance of several outside agencies and organizations to assist us in this task. We are ready to begin scheduling times to meet with men seeking reentry services, as well as with men looking to begin involvement with rehabilitative groups, committees, and religious offerings. All we need is the authorization from the department of correction and the cooperation of the Norfolk administration in scheduling times, places, and minimal service accommodations (copy access, supplies, etc.). Some of the aspects already in place are as follows;

- Assistance of St. Francis House, Moving Ahead Program,
- Coordination with End the Odds Coalition,
- Support of Real Cost of Prisons Project,
- Comprehensive reentry resources for food, clothing, housing, administrative services, counseling, substance abuse, etc.,
- Parole and Commutation committee with manuals and step by step guide,
- Residential housing and halfway house referrals,
- Medical care resource lists,
- MCI Norfolk Program applications, waiting list letters,
- General support information and "how to" assistance.

Our Board of Directors, and some dedicated general members, have an extremely impressive track record of success in securing services for prisoners. The restraints placed upon us by prison policy and repressive administrators must be broken in these trying times. We are just asking for a real chance to prove to the public that we can increase their safety through our initiative. 200 plus years of corrections has taught us that it is near impossible to bridge the prisoner - jailer divide. What must be attempted is to have the

prisoner assist the prisoner. No barriers need be crossed. No understanding gap need be bridged. Understanding of the needs and concerns is at the surface from the beginning. With the proper support from the department of correction we will not fail in reducing the recidivism rate, while increasing the much needed hope in a system so filled with hopelessness.

PART IV

LIFERS' ARE THE TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN.....

Lifers' are the top of the food chain in the prison hierarchy. When you afford the men serving life sentences the opportunity to live meaningful lives their positive attitude trickles down to the 95% of prisoners who will be returning to the streets of our cities and towns.^{/20} The Norfolk Lifers' Group Prisoner Reentry Initiative will allow such men to assist others with reentry and program involvement. The sense of purpose from these undertakings will reduce the level of prison hopelessness which sparks violence, drives suicide, and defeats so many good intentions. Men in prison lack positive influences and this has been shown to increase the recidivism rate.^{/21} This initiative will "cut both ways", so to speak, by assisting men who are reentering society and affording men who may remain in prison for life a purpose to have hope and offer an avenue for self-actualization. This equals reduced in prison violence, protects staff, and creates a healing environment of positive reinforcement. When one man feels he has benefited another it can open the door for so much more positive change. This is why the Norfolk Lifers' Group is the right choice for the test model. We have the needed experience, currently possess the ability, and are dedicated to ensuring that the safety of the public is properly protected.

PART V

THE DESIGN MODEL IS SIMPLE.....

The design model is simple because we have many of the elements already in place. What we would need to immediately start working with prisoners is extremely easy to facilitate. Some of the simple requirements are as follows;

- Daily space availability in the CSD, OIC, or Vocational Education Building,
- Provision of "rosters" of new entries to the prison to be connected to services,
- Allowance to construct weekly attendance rosters of men to be provided with services,
- Allowance for a Lifers' Group representative to be present at Inmate Orientation to describe the services offered,
- Clearance to enter the Probation Unit and 8 Block to meet with new entries and schedule services,
- Creation of a Reentry Initiative Z account to be used for Initiative postal and other costs,
- The full support of the administration from the central headquarters down to the facility level.

If we were to be afforded these minimal requirements today we could begin to assist prisoners at the dawn, and begin to work toward reducing recidivism with no additional costs to the taxpayer. We cannot afford to waste another moment. The time for progressive, economic, and truly feasible methods has arrived and we must begin here at MCI Norfolk with this model.

CONCLUSION

THERE IS NOTHING TO LOSE.....

There is nothing to lose and everything to gain in giving this initiative a shot. For far too long we have wallowed in the self-fulfilling defeatist philosophy that to improve corrections we need

to throw dollars at all the problems. The prisoner resource can no longer be ignored. The false pictures painted by too powerful unions must be ignored. The fact that we are overstaffed to the point of ONE BILLION DOLLAR budgets cannot be ignored. Change does not have to come at a high cost, economically or socially, and the societal and economic benefits of what we propose cannot be negated.

Men who claim to be progressive leaders must prove the metal of those words by giving this easily workable progressive model a chance. Here at MCI Norfolk, where Malcolm X changed his life, a facility which once lead the nation in rehabilitative progress, the time has come to once again lead the way in bringing hope back to a society which feels everyone deserves a second chance. Please allow us to afford men those second chances, but even more importantly allow us to be productive members of society by playing a role in our own destiny.

THE NORFOLK LIFERS' GROUP

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FOOTNOTES

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6. Reincarcerated: The Experiences of Men Returning to Massachusetts Prisons, Crime & Justice Institute.

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11. Commonwealth of Massachusetts Substance Abuse Strategic Plan, 2005.
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14. Rethinking Justice in Massachusetts, C. Roberts & J. Doble, 2005
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