

Secretary's Message
February 28, 2020

As you read or listen to this message, I do not know where you are, what you are thinking, or what you are feeling. Some of you have been with us for a long time and have grown and matured in our system and in life; others are early in your sentence or supervision program and this may be your first message from "The Secretary." Perhaps you think we have so little in common, that we have no reason to interact. I admit, I have never been on probation or in prison, so I won't try to tell you that I know how you are feeling or what you are thinking. But maybe there is at least one aspect of life and experience that can help us to connect.

While I have never stayed longer than a duty day in a prison, I do understand forced separation from those I love. Prior to this stage of my life, I was in the military. Over my career, I spent nearly four years deployed in countries like Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. All were hard places. I was away from my home and did not have the choice to leave. Sometimes I felt separated from "real life," almost like I was in "time out." I felt that life would not start again until I returned home. My longest deployment was eighteen months; a rather short sentence from the view of many of you. But it sure seemed like a long time. I read the life story of a former Florida inmate who dedicated his life to aiding others with re-entry and substance use treatment. That inmate, Frank Costantino, called his book "Holes in Time."

Whether today is your first day on supervision or in prison, or your thirty-eighth year behind the fence, you may wonder if today matters. Is the idea of connecting with your family and friends or planning your return home stressful and unclear? Do you wonder if anyone cares for you now? Is your family making plans for your return, even if it is years away? You may feel that because of where you are now, that the answer must be "no." Please allow me to provide you a reason to think otherwise, to act otherwise and find hope.

You are at the center of an intense national debate. Leaders, legislators, legal and law enforcement professionals, professors, community organizers, executives from private organizations and major corporations are all talking about you. And if the number of emails I get is any indicator, many of your family members are focused on you as well. That focus means something very important and sure beats the alternative of apathy and indifference. There is real effort, expanding effort, to understand your needs and prepare you for your success as a returning citizen or to help you while under supervision. Real efforts are being made to help give you a second chance.

In April 2019, President Donald Trump declared April as the Second Chance Month. I was sitting about twenty feet from our President when he made this announcement, having just attended the 2019 Criminal Justice Reform Summit at the White House. That afternoon, the President stood with six former federal inmates. All six inmates were released under the Federal First Step Act, and all six had an opportunity to tell their story. Think about that, six former inmates standing with the President of the United States of America! During the ceremony the President announced the "second step." He said that the Second Step Act would focus on the successful reentry and finding jobs for Americans with past criminal records.

In February 2020, Governor Ron DeSantis visited Operation New Hope in Jacksonville and announced the formation of the Florida Foundation for Correctional Excellence. This Foundation will link private organizations and businesses that see YOU as part of their future, to the Florida Department of Corrections. This Foundation will fund and develop programs, training and re-entry efforts in our institutions. Our Governor said, "We have to do more to get inmates ready for release – ready to be employees and to be productive members of our communities." This new organization is very important, and this effort is focused on you and your success now and in the future.

The Florida Department of Corrections has a mission to support public safety beyond incarceration and supervision with your successful rehabilitation and restoration back into your community. From the moment you come under our supervision or arrive at a prison, to the last day of your sentence or supervision program, we work with intent to provide you with tools to succeed.

We also work with intent to convince your communities to welcome you back as returning citizens. We strive to help them understand what you have done right while in prison or under supervision - if you have done right. Your community should give you the opportunity for a job, a home and acceptance. Your community should give you redemption and a second chance. So we are encouraging community volunteers to work with you now. I hope that on the day you leave, someone is waiting for you on the other side of that gate. Someone you know, a family member, a friend or a mentor.

So why is it important to find and hold onto hope? Hope means we focus on what we can do, instead of what could have been. Hope means we choose to have a positive attitude and act, even when everything inside of us wants to give up. Hope accepts that our past actions have consequences, but that we have set a path to personal change, redemption and a successful future. With hope, we can remove hate, fear, insecurity and disappointment and grasp onto the truth that, regardless of circumstances, TODAY MATTERS.

Please understand that for us to help you, you must strive to be actively involved in your treatment, education and programs. We need you to commit to cooperate with us to make a difference. I assure you - your family and your community will notice our joint effort. One day, you will look back and say that your decision today may well have saved your life. Today, you can start walking a path that will make your family and community proud of you. Today, you can find hope for a bright and fulfilling future. Today, and every day beyond of your supervision or incarceration need not be a "Hole in Time".

Mark S. Inch

Secretary

Florida Department of Corrections