

Opinion: Views & commentary from around the community

Questions & Answer #2



Matthew Hattley

Events of recent weeks have stirred memories of 1968 and set off waves of anger directed across racial lines. The shootings in Dallas by a black veteran who served in Afghanistan have crystalized white America's greatest fear, that of armed black men. The shooting in Minnesota of a black man in a car, who was reaching for his ID/gun license, has epitomized the fear that governs the way many see police, white and black, and their lack of training and professionalism. (He fired into a car with a child in the back seat.) How is this playing out among prisoners in Woodbourne?

The recent events have not really affected the population in prison here. Many individuals are upset that things have gotten to this point; society is currently out of control. Yet the majority of us are not surprised. We have all witnessed how police officers escape indictment and prosecution even when there is ample video evidence to convict any non-law enforcement person. Yes, police officers are often put into stressful situations that require them to perform as the situation dictates. However, there should be nothing overly stressful about a traffic stop. Yes, the man was reaching for his ID/gun license because that is what you do when stopped by a police officer. One should not have to fear for his/her life every time he/she encounters a police officer, who is supposed to "serve and protect" the citizens, not publicly execute them! These are city streets, not war zones! As representatives of the law, police officers should be held to a higher standard of conduct, and not be permitted to escape justice. The only way to stop this unacceptable behavior is to first acknowledge that there is no "superior" group, and understand that everyone must be treated with respect, regardless of his/her ethnicity. Law enforcement employees require adequate training to deal with all people justly. As a nation in 2016, we should be progressing not regressing. In essence we must all come to common grounds... Peacefully.

One thing I am curious about is when an inmate has a release date in the near future, does the prison do anything to prepare them? Especially those who have been in for a long time?

The only thing the prison system currently offers individuals about to be released is Phase III — a 12 week program that ensures the individual has a birth certificate, social security card, and a basic understanding of how to fill out a resume. In addition they are given a short list of potential employers. However, this only applies to individuals making their first parole board. For those being released after two or more boards, there is nothing being offered to them; they are on their own. The system does not differentiate between individuals doing 5 years or 25 years in this respect. It's basically up to the individual to do everything necessary to prepare themselves to re-enter society. Everyone being released is also provided with a \$40.00 check (this is our own money compiled over a period of time from our wages) and a ride to the nearest bus station. Unless, of course, they have someone picking them up. Unfortunately, there is simply one program available for everyone, or at least those who qualify. DOCCS' administration is well aware of this, yet refuses to rectify the problem. The only way this may possibly change is if Governor Cuomo chooses to intervene.

Bernie Sanders had an ad about education giving inmates a second chance. Trump seems not to care. Does the inside community have any thoughts about the current presidential election?

First, it is already proven that incarcerated individuals receiving an education, especially on the college level, show drastically less recidivism (from 50 percent to less than 5 percent). Graduates' employment opportunities are greatly increased. They receive so much more than merely a degree, like the tools necessary to navigate life's various challenges. A college education teaches them to be better thinkers by analyzing situations from different perspectives. It allows an individual to recognize and strengthen his/her self-worth. It also gives incarcerated individuals something positive and productive to do in a place filled with so much negativity. It's important to take advantage of the opportunities currently available, specifically where receiving a college education is concerned. Bard Prison Initiative offers us this wonderful opportunity to better ourselves — at no cost to the taxpayers. Second, just like everyone out there in society at large, everyone in here has their own thoughts and opinions regarding the upcoming election — it's an endless debate. I personally believe that Hillary Clinton will be our next president. The climate for that has already been set to make it possible to have our first woman president. Just like President Obama, Clinton is about to make history. Hopefully she will be inclined

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to support and implement some genuine criminal justice reform, starting in her home state.

What are the terms people prefer — prisoner, convict, inmate? Thoughts on the various terms?

I honestly do not approve of any of those labels. Many others take serious offense to them. Although, if I have to be referred to as something other than my name, then I personally prefer the terms prisoner or convict. I am currently deprived of my liberty and serving a lengthy prison sentence. I can accept this terminology when it's in context. Inmate has a strong connotation with a hospital patient. Definitely not appropriate. You also have those who still refer to us as "offenders" as well as other derogatory terms that cannot be printed. However, the politically correct term is incarcerated individual.

Matthew Hattley, #93A9739
Woodbourne Correctional Facility
P.O. Box 1000
Woodbourne, NY 12788-1000