League Leaders Visit Lifers

James Keown

On a chilly and rainy night in February, three members from the League of Women Voters walked into MCI-Nofolk, the largest medium security prison for men in Massachusetts. As the trio entered the prison's auditorium, about 100 people -- most serving life without parole -- stood to applaud. An organization founded a century ago to bring the vote to women had come to meet with a small collective of America's modern disenfranchised class -- prisoners.

The visit with Norfolk's Lifers' Group was not the first time the League had been inside a prison. Judy Zaunbrecher, co-president of the Boston chapter of the LWV, shared how the League had been visiting prisons in the state over the past two years to shape the group's position on a number of criminal justice issues.

Criminal justice reform has long been connected to the League of Women Voters. In the early days of the suffragette movement that led to the group's formation, it was common for women to be arrested at rallies and marches. Through the early part of the 1900s in Massachusetts, a husband could deliver an outspoken wife to the front gate of the state's prison for women with a simple declaration that she was deranged and presently unfit to perform her wifely duties. Zaunbrecher told the crowd at Norfolk that today, as it has through its history, the League supports changes that will create a "judicial system that provides equal justice for all."

In 2018, Massachusetts passed an omnibus bill to reform the state's criminal justice system. The measure was developed as part of the nationwide Criminal Justice Reinvestment movement, largely funded by the VERA Institute. Moderate and conservative politicians in the state had hoped that the bill would satiate the growing call by progressives to overhaul all elements of the

state's justice system. Instead, the new law, which failed to deal with key issues like parole, the aging prison population, and sentencing for most offenses, ignited a new spark of reform. Almost overnight, new coalitions came together both inside and outside of the walls to push for real comprehensive justice reform.

Criminal justice is a policy issue, like health care, that many think they understand fully. Many people's notions on the topics are challenged only when they find themselves tangled in the complexities of the issues, such as, in the case of health care, following the diagnosis of a severe illness, or, as in the case of criminal justice, following the arrest of a friend, neighbor, or loved one. Often, it takes life altering events such as these for people to see the dark corners of an issue.

Pattye Comfort, the League's executive director, has seen some of those corners as she has worked to better understand the criminal justice system. Comfort talked to the Lifers' Group about the renewed push to re-enfranchise Massachusetts prisoners. The right had been stripped away in 2000 through an amendment to the state's constitution. The League, Comfort said, had been working with MassPower and the Emancipation Initiative, an organization founded at MCI-Norfolk by Derrick Washington (who is now held at another prison). The LWV helped collect signatures for a ballot initiative seeking to once again allow those in prison to vote. Comfort shared that the push "fell short, but we're not giving up." The League plans to renew the signature drive next year.

Voting rights for incarcerated people was only one of the issues the League of Women Voters has been supporting. The 3000 members of the LWV selected 147 bills, from more than 5,000, to work on during the current legislative session that concludes this summer. The League's legislative specialist, Colleen Kirby, who had organized the group's visit to MCI-Norfolk, told the Lifers' Group that nine of the bills the LWV had chosen to support dealt directly with the criminal justice system. The collection of bills focused on many of the areas left untouched by the state's 2018 criminal justice law.

Most men in the audience were concerned with one bill in particular, a proposal to extend an opportunity for parole to everyone in prison, regardless of sentence length, after serving 25 years. The plan, commonly called Parole Review for All or PRFA, did not make it out of the Judiciary Committee. Instead, as Kirby noted, "it was sent to study." First time bills, especially potentially controversial ones, are often sent to study. Most are re-filed in subsequent sessions until one side or the other can build enough support to direct the bill's fate. "PRFA will come back," Kirby announced. "There are strong advocates for the bill." Kirby's words drew anxious applause from the audience.

Following the meeting with the general membership, the three women hosted a more intimate question and answer session. One man asked how prisoners, who are disenfranchised and who have limited resources, can help promote policy changes. Kirby's response was simple but direct. "Tell your stories." She paused and scanned the crowd closely. "We get a lot of changes when people are willing to share their personal stories."

The guidance echoed the strategy used by women a century earlier. Yes, women marched. Yes, they protested But, change happened when people learned the stories of the suffragettes -- when they could experience the women's struggles. Americans discovered through their stories that these women were not crazed radicals -- they were our mothers, sisters, and wives. Likewise, as the League of Women Voters has demonstrated through their work, the 2.3 million people incarcerated in America are not crazed criminals -- they are our friends, neighbors, and loved ones.