

**NORFOLK LIFERS GROUP
MCI-NORFOLK
P.O. BOX 43
NORFOLK, MA 02056**

September 7, 2010

Ms. Sandra McCroom
Undersecretary for Criminal Affairs
Executive Office of Public Safety & Security
One Ashburton Place
Boston, MA 02108

RE: Charging Fees to Prisoners

Dear Undersecretary McCroom,

On behalf of the members of the Norfolk Lifers Group, I am writing regarding the issue of charging prisoners fees or a charge for each day spent incarcerated or, in the alternative, ending paying prisoners for working jobs in a correctional institution. As Chairperson for the legislative commission, we are hopeful that you and your fellow members will conduct a complete and arduous study of this issue before endorsing what has been falsely portrayed as a simple question of economics. Charging prisoners a plethora of fees and/or eliminating pay for prisoner jobs, however, has far deeper ramifications than has been argued by such as Bristol Sheriff Thomas Hodgson.

Sources of Income:

As has been highlighted in previous discussions concerning charging fees, a primary source of funds for some prisoners is family or friends. But, for far more prisoners, the sole source of income is what they earn from working skilled and/or unskilled jobs within a prison environment. It needs to be pointed out that the vast majority of jobs pay only \$1 to \$2 per day, five days a week - not a substantial amount of money, but enough for many to survive on in prison. But, eliminating pay for work or increasing the amounts of or number of fees will only serve to cut off or severely restrict disposable income for prisoners.

Impact on Institutions:

Presently, the Department of Correction (DOC) supplies one bar of soap (approximately 1/4" x 2" x 1 1/2" - not unlike a bar of complimentary soap offered in hotels) and one roll of toilet paper per week. Consequently, if a prisoner wishes to use shampoo, conditioner, a razor, shaving cream, deodorant, skin lotion, foot powder, soap which does not irritate one's skin, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and/or mouthwash, amongst many other hygienic items, then the prisoner must purchase said items from the prison canteen run by the DOC.

If a prisoner wished to purchase jeans, shirts, underwear, socks, sneakers, a sweater, a coat, a bathrobe, shower slippers, a television, a radio, headphones (required by the DOC to listen to a television or radio from which the speakers have been removed as a condition of sale), a fan, a typewriter, and/or typewriter ribbons, amongst other things, once again, the prisoner must purchase these from the prison canteen, run by the DOC.

There are several points of impact on the DOC. First, if the prisoner does not purchase these items for him/herself, then the DOC will incur the cost of providing most of the items. While the DOC would not be required to supply personal televisions or radios, there can be little doubt that basic hygienic and clothing items, now supplied by prisoners themselves will then have to be purchased by the DOC at considerable cost.

Second, the DOC presently receives a 14.5% kickback from all purchases from the canteen and even more from telephone calls. Consequently, if the source of income, i.e., pay for jobs, is eliminated or severely reduced by increased fees, then the DOC will also lose a source of revenue.

Third, eliminating pay for work, concomitantly eliminates the primary reason for long-term and life term prisoners to work. While offering merely good-time deductions might attract some prisoners, it will not attract those who are the most skilled and knowledgeable, by virtue of their lengthy stays and in-house training in an institution. Lifers and long-termers who have been housed in a particular prison and have been employed as plumbers, electricians, cablemen, teachers, clerks, mechanics and a host of other jobs are intimately familiar with the idiosyncrasies of each institution. To replace these skilled workers with staff would be prohibitively expensive. It is my understanding that the entry salary, not including benefits, for a maintenance staff personnel is \$60,000. Having to hire numerous staff to make up for the loss of skilled prisoner labor would quickly eat up and then exceed any savings garnered from eliminating pay for prisoners or increasing fees. There simply would be no reason for a skilled prisoner serving a life sentence to work without pay and lifers are the backbone of any work force in prisons today and have been for decades.

Impact on Families and/or Friends:

As was pointed out during the past debate over fees, a burden will be placed on those who can least afford it, i.e., families and/or friends of prisoners. These citizens already pay taxes to support an over bloated DOC and these taxpayers should not be expected to pay more. It should not be ignored that the DOC averages slightly more than two prisoners per employee. That is the second worst ratio in the country. In fact, in many states, the ratio is upwards to twelve prisoners per employee. To confront the budget crisis, what needs to be given serious consideration is reducing DOC line employees which would save far more funds than would be squeezed out of family and/or friends for increased fees or to replace lost wages.

Impact on Reentry:

Those prisoners who work and earn money in prison and who are not serving life sentences, are required to have 50% of their earnings placed in a savings account so that the prisoner will have a financial resource once he/she returns to society. Eliminating pay earned for work, eliminates the savings accounts and puts the prisoner at risk upon release of not being able to meet his/her expenses which acclimating to rejoining society. This is a simple prescription for increased recidivism.

It is our hope that the issues raised in this letter will be given full and careful consideration by you and your committee. Charging increased fees and/or eliminating pay for work by prisoners would cost more, for the reasons cited herein, than would be saved. We ask that the committee resist simplistic and ill-conceived arguments put forth by those who are not able to "see the forest for the trees."

Thank you for your time and consideration of these points regarding increasing fees and/or eliminating pay for working in prisons. While we understand that the primary call was for such fees and the elimination of pay to be applied to jails, it has been our experience that if such changes are implemented for jails, it will only be a short time before the changes will be directed toward the state prisons. One error would be to assume that since those in county jails are either awaiting trial or serving relatively short sentences, the impact may seem not to be as devastating for them as for state prisons. In either case, however, increasing fees and/or eliminating pay for working will only prove counterproductive in the long run.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gordon Haas". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Gordon Haas
Chairman
Norfolk Lifers Group