

The Cornerstone of Change

Within the Department of Correction for the past twenty-plus years there has been a noticeable shift in ideology and practice affecting the entire prison population, but most adversely, Lifers (1st and 2nd degree). This shift was spearheaded by the regressive, reactionary campaigns in the wake of the “Willie Horton Scandal” through propaganda and misinformation. But the facts tell a different story, and today’s reality is evidence enough to not only suggest, but demand, a return to the progressive era, which favored restoration, reentry, and rehabilitation over retribution.

As the recidivism rate continued to rise throughout the 90’s and into the new millennium, it was clear that a return to the archaic system of “busting rocks” euphemistically alluded to as “tough on crime” was, in reality, tough on society, tough on family, tough on rehabilitation, and tough on taxpayers. It was a return to an outmoded and illogical system in which no one benefits: not the victims of crimes, nor the families of victims; not the offenders nor their families; and of course, not the communities that the offenders left from or the ones that they will be returning to. It was a losing proposition that was implemented and maintained through fear and manipulation fomented by politicians and the media. But now that it appears that fear’s grip is loosening and society is crying out for the changes that have been so desperately needed, there is an entire segment of the prison population not only neglected and discriminated against, but figuratively (and literally in many cases) left for dead: Lifers.

Most of the media and political attention regarding policy change has been directed at “non-violent” offenders. Within the DOC as well, they are the beneficiaries of the changes taking place. Ignoring for the moment the fact that the terms *violent* and *non-violent* applied to prisoners based on the crime for which they were sentenced are misnomers (a drug dealer who carries a gun and shoots at rival drug dealers but gets sentenced for trafficking is hardly non-violent), there is the more important fact that you cannot correct a *whole* problem by treating only *part* of it. That is the glaringly obvious shortcoming in the policy changes and proposals, but it goes much, much further than that.

The largest push, both internally and externally, regarding the DOC is for re-entry services. Lifers, almost exclusively, are denied any kind of re-entry (in spite of the fact that the majority will in fact someday re-enter society). The three most important aspects of re-entry—rehabilitative programming, vocational/educational training, and transitional “step-down” release—are all denied to Lifers. Not only is this an egregious violation of the Constitutional protection of equal rights, it is not grounded on any reliable premise. There is neither any evidence to support or suggest that Lifers would not benefit or do not require re-entry training, nor any evidence that they would be unresponsive; however, there are mountains of evidence to the contrary.

Historically, Lifers have had the lowest recidivism rates, most positive institutional adjustment, and most significant impact/influence on other prisoners. Almost every rehabilitative program in the DOC is facilitated primarily by Lifers. Every program that has an inmate board or governing body to guide and direct it, that board is composed mostly of Lifers. They are the organizers, representatives, supporters, instructors, moderators, facilitators, and mentors in these institutions, in spite of the practices and policies that discourage and hinder them.

It is not only unfair to Lifers that they be excluded from these re-entry initiatives, it is unfair to the other inmates and society who lose infinitely more than would be apparent at first glance. So let us not

be as superficial and careless as those who created the policies that have since collapsed upon themselves; let us look deeper, with an open mind, and without blinders.

It is an absolute established fact that prison in and of itself does nothing to deter crime or prevent future criminal behavior; it has also been established that peer influence and social environment are the most determinative factors in encouraging or discouraging criminal behavior. Excluding Lifers from rehabilitative programs, vocational/educational training, and transitional release not only deprives nearly one-fifth of the inmate population of the re-entry process, it has a negative influence on the prison environment, and wastes the greatest—and perhaps only effective—resource available for decreasing recidivism.

Within the prison system, a highly social and hierarchical environment, Lifers occupy the top of the hierarchy and set the example that others follows. They serve the longest time and therefore are generally afforded a higher level of respect and consideration from their peers; they know the ins and outs of the system and are the ones that others turn to for advice and assistance. When they are allowed to be a part of the re-entry process, not only do *they* benefit, but the entire system benefits as a result of the influence that these “old timers” impart to others. And it does not stop at the perimeter of the institution; it extends to families as well—sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, siblings....

Any concern as to Lifer’s responsiveness or suitability for re-entry can be evidenced by the history of their involvement in that process during the 70’ and 80’s. Hundreds of Lifers took advantage of and benefited from participation in rehabilitative programs, vocational and educational training, and transitional release, the vast majority of whom are successful, pro-social citizens today. Many more Lifers participated in the furlough program, successfully interacting in the community, in some cases, hundreds of times. Sadly, many of those Lifers who clearly demonstrated through the furlough program their ability to function in society and contribute as productive citizens are still in prison due to the almost complete cessation of commutations during the past twenty-plus years.

As it stands today, Lifers are being relegated to positions of obscurity and inferiority; they are neglected and discriminated against, doing not only them, but their families, victims, other inmates, and society a great disservice. They are a valuable asset in maintaining stability and positively influencing their environment in *all* levels of security, and should be afforded *more* opportunities, not *less*. The more they are excluded, the more others are deprived of their positive influence, not only within the institution, but families and friends outside as well (Children whose parents are incarcerated are themselves incarcerated at 3-5 times the rate of the general population. Allowing Lifers to participate in rehabilitative programs and transition to lower security not only facilitates more meaningful and productive relationships with their children—as well as nieces, nephews, younger siblings, and even grandchildren—but it strengthens familial bonds, decreases the chances that those children/adolescents will themselves become offenders, and has a positive influence on the community).

There is an absolute need for change within the Department of Correction—the *entire* Department; not just drug dealers or armed robbers, or any other segment of the population. The changes need to be beneficial to *everyone* in the DOC, and like any other constructive undertaking, the foundation is the most important thing. Lifers are the cornerstone of the prison population, the rock upon which this “new” system needs to be built. They are the ones others will turn to for advice and look to for support. They are the example the others will follow. If they are left out in the cold, everyone will suffer.