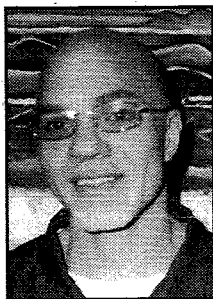


Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley

Could 2014 Be A Year Of Promise?



Matthew Hattley

After living in a dejected and detached environment for twenty-one plus years, I seem to ask myself the same question every year: when will the madness stop?

The more I develop, the worse the situation appears, sometimes. For instance, when it comes to breaking rules and laws inside the walls, it seems that only prisoners are ever punished. As I get older it becomes more difficult to bite my

tongue when I witness blatant unprofessional behavior from those hired by the state to oversee the NYS prison population. There's always that small group of rogue employees in every state agency who, basically, do and say whatever they please with absolutely no accountability. Because of the way things are organized, this is especially true in corrections.

For reasons beyond me, this small group believes it's their duty to antagonize, belittle, degrade and constantly punish us for our crimes. This seems to be what they live for. Yet the moment any of us challenges them on this stuff, their first response is to exaggerate the situation and escort us in handcuffs to the Special Housing Unit (solitary confinement).

Now, confinement in the SHU has been deemed unconstitutional when the term runs to more than 30 days for non-violent acts. But those administering these sanctions ignore this and hand out 60 or more days for something like a "dirty urine," or a sample indicating drug use.

And unfortunately, this kind of thinking continues on to the Parole Board. The majority of parole commissioners

also believe it's their job to add more years to our sentences by giving an additional two years before our next parole hearing. This practice specifically applies to VFOs (violent felony offenders), which by the way are the group with the lowest recidivism rate. Go figure! Ignoring court mandates, the commissioners simply do what they want and currently there's no penalty applied to them for this behavior.

The Parole Board just won't consider such things as the way we change during a long sentence. They ignore achievements gained by prisoners, or reports on our ability to interact positively with staff and other prisoners. They also ignore family and community support and potential employment offers. The only thing that matters is the nature of our crimes. Of course, those will never change; and so they keep us incarcerated for as long as they possibly can, regardless of the expense to the taxpayer. Currently, the Parole Board grants parole to about 25 percent of the VFO's who appear before them, though 80 percent are actually eligible.

Now, many in society at large would say that we are getting what we deserve for breaking the law. And yet every case is different, and the average citizen has no knowledge of the laws or the circumstances surrounding both the crimes and the convictions, so that response can be seen as an easy recourse to "stereotypes." Regardless of what many believe, just about everyone has the potential to change for the better, especially after living in a cage for ten, twenty or thirty years. After all, that's the reasoning behind these sentences and the entire corrections establishment.

In 2013, the controversy regarding the Parole Board and its decision making was not only exposed, but opposed by former Parole Board commissioners and morally conscious politicians alike. Far too many prisoners are denied parole even though they are eligible, simply because the commissioners do not want to appear "soft on crime." No one wants to be held responsible for releasing a prisoner who might commit a new crime while on parole. I would say this ideology is unrealistic in today's world, especially with long sentence serving VFOs.

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Of course, I realize that emotion is a powerful force and that emotional concerns can overwhelm the facts and the law, but these decisions should not be subject to bias or malice; prisoners who have served their time deserve a fair hearing.

Everyone requires something to look forward to — not just broken promises and disappointment. Non-violent offenders receive all the benefits, even with the highest recidivism rates. When will those like myself be granted the opportunity to show that we've changed for the better? That's why genuine parole reform is necessary and it's in the state's best interest to pass the SAFE Parole Act.

So... Will 2014 be a promising year for VFO prisoners, or will it just be a continuation of the unproductive years before it? I challenge those in power to finally take a stand for what's actually equitable, not just what appeals to emotions and maybe fills the campaign coffers. Hey, surprise me for a change!

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