

The Patriot-News

Publication: Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA)

Author(s): Rev. Ron Tilley II, Exec. Dir. of Firm Foundation of Pennsylvania, and Darlene Moore, Co-convener of the Dauphin County Chapter of the Pennsylvania Prison Society. Both are founding members of the County Prison Watch.

Date: July 22, 2007

EDITORIAL: Problems In Prison Bleed Into Community

Why should we care what happens to prisoners? In the weeks since public awareness has arisen of alleged problems at Dauphin County Prison and since the formation of the County Prison Watch coalition, this has been a common question of the media and the public alike.

A prisoner complaint received by one of our coalition partners, the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, might best summarize why the public should care about what happens at the county prison: "I walked into this prison scared and came out hating. They made it that way."

Is this the kind of person we want released back into our community? What happens in prison doesn't stay in prison. It spills back out onto our streets. What happens in prison comes back home with the prisoners after release and with the correctional officers at the end of a day's work.

Of the seven organizations involved in County Prison Watch, none of us are naive enough to believe that all of the information we receive from inmates is 100 percent accurate. Nor do we condone the crimes that have landed the inmates in prison. Recent investigations by the Dauphin County district attorney's office have revealed inmates who allegedly lied when they accused guards of beating them.

But the number of complaints is overwhelming. The Lewisburg Prison Project and the Harrisburg office of the ACLU of Pennsylvania are both responsible for the entire U.S. Middle District of Pennsylvania, which covers 33 counties. Any complaint from any county prison in those 33 counties can go to their offices. Among them, Dauphin County Prison stands out. This is a conversation that has been happening in city churches, community organizations and the offices of public interest law firms for years. Our coalition and members of the community want to know why these allegations of abuse have continued to fester.

It is difficult to measure how broad the problems are at Dauphin County Prison. Is it a case of a few bad apples? Or is there a culture in the institution that has sustained itself under prison leadership? County Prison Watch recognizes the hard work that DCP guards do on a daily basis. Our

assumption is that most of them carry out their duties in an ethical manner that enhances the safety of inmates and staff.

But it only takes a few guards behaving badly to create the perception of corruption among the ranks. And the bad apples create a corrosive environment for the entire prison staff. The culture of secrecy and retaliation further compounds the problem. Systemic change at the prison would not only benefit the inmates. It would also benefit the guards who do their jobs well and in a professional manner.

Although the district attorney has been pursuing a criminal investigation, County Prison Watch believes that court action, whether it be criminal or civil, is not a cure-all for Dauphin County Prison's ills. In fact, a civil lawsuit aimed at improving prison conditions and halting prisoner abuse would likely create even greater hurdles for creating true systemic change at the prison because of the alienating and divisive nature of this type of court action.

Rather, systemic change at Dauphin County Prison can happen through a collaborative process that engages all the parties involved. Representatives of the prison board, guards, community leaders and inmates must engage each other, and out of this a special task force needs to be formed. Although some might say that engaging the inmates is a "bleeding heart" idea, it is actually a suggestion given to County Prison Watch by a staffer from the U.S. Department of Justice.

This task force must create a plan of action for addressing problems in the institution. The plan of action would result from identifying new resources that could be available for the prison. It could include new and additional training for guards and new programs to benefit the inmates. It could include striving toward accreditation by the American Correctional Association or the American Jail Association, which have sets of national standards for correctional facilities.

The task force could look at the shifting of staff assignments to break up staff-inmate and staff-staff tensions. An examination of the racial diversity of the prison staff might be another avenue for the task force to explore. Finally, it is past time for our local and state leaders to examine how to best save taxpayers' money by providing preventive measures as an alternative to incarceration and lower the recidivism rate in Dauphin County and throughout the state.

None of these ideas are set in stone, and this work will be fluid. Nevertheless, County Prison Watch believes that solutions are out there for the taking, if all parties involved are interested in working together. On the other hand, if people choose not to work together, it could be a long, hot summer, with a bitter winter to follow.

©2007 The Patriot-News

© 2007 PennLive.com All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.firmfoundation.org/County-Prison-Watch-Patriot-News-2007-07-22.pdf>

Originally accessed July 28, 2007 on

<http://www.pennlive.com/printer/printer.ssf?/base/opinion/118496492127240.xml&coll=1>