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Jobs, Industry And  
Shirley World  
by  
Charles N. Diorio

Overcrowding, apathy and waste hinder opportunity here in MCI-Shirley, a medium security prison home to fifteen hundred convicts in Middlesex County a rural area of eastern Massachusetts.

"Shirley World," as inmates here call it, offers few prison jobs. Convict workers, referred to as cadre, wait months sometimes years for a chance to push a broom or mop a floor.

Inmate cadre is the formal term for that group of criminally sentenced prisoners with special skills or abilities, for example, cooking meals, maintenance, or clerical workers who are utilized in providing direct services to a pre-release state correctional institution on a routine basis.

Most state prisons nationwide employ inmate workers out of necessity. Convict laborers cook food, clean grounds and assist the elderly. Here in Shirley, the superintendent also permits light industry: a sewing shop.

Industry throughout the Commonwealth is defined as any activity existing in a correctional system which uses inmate labor to produce goods and services for sale. This institution makes tee-shirts, boxer shorts, and sheets.

Each correctional facility offers its own hiring scheme. Here in this prison camp new arrivals must be classified able to work before they are permitted to enter industry. Exceptions are made for kitchen workers.

Because of high turnover, the pool of workers for food service positions is wider. Prospective workers must be cleared by this facilities medical department for contagious disease like hepatitis. Finally, internal security officers check records weeding out candidates based generally on charges of commitment, institutional adjustment and length of stay.

A recent look at the waiting list for the computer skills class, for example, showed eighteen pages of names. The list to become involved in this important program is not based on first-come-first-served. Prisoners sentenced with short commitments are placed close to the top of the list. Long term convicts facing many years or decades are placed close to the bottom. Much of this artificial and arbitrary policy has to do with good time credits inmates and prison officials count on to escape Shirley World.

My name, for example, was at the bottom of the second to last page. Next to many names were notations such as "first degree Life". I thought, maybe I'll be placed in the computer class when I'm about sixty-five just in time to retire.

There's little pretense in a modern prison camp. What is striking is the role civilian employee's play in this whole affair. Teachers and administrators become accomplice to a kind of mummery, a theater of the absurd, where prisoners jockey for positions in programs with few if any vacancy.

Computer class offers only thirteen terminals. The classroom is confining. Our general library employ eight workers, this includes three law library clerks. Library times must be staggard due to demand and limited space.

Educators who oversee such diverse opportunities as a barbershop class and adult continueing education become witness to a revolving door approach to learning. Civilians who work in these places aid and abet facility misappropriation and indifference.

One pallid New England afternoon, during this lock up's biweekly gripefest known simply as happy hour, I had a chance to speak with the deputy superintendent of security Gregory McAnn about my own discontent with my kitchen job.

McAnn, a tall man who reminded me of my cousin - a Lt. Colonel in the Army - arrived and stood shoulder to shoulder with other staff and prison authorities. I walked up to him and said simply, "I hate working in the kitchen."

Suprised, he looked sympathetic and listened to me. A fine mist of April rain was blowing his suit and tie into the cold breeze. "Maybe I can get a little job pushing a broom somewhere?" I asked pathetically.

McAnn finally told me: "We have fifteen hundred inmates, and not a lot of jobs." His demeanor was naturally poised. "We throw people in jobs in the kitchen. Men steal and get fired. They quit. There's a lot of turnover in the kitchen."

There was little hope in his voice. "I don't want to quit, and I don't want to get fired." I said.

"Come back on Thursday afternoon. Talk to the assignment officer." McAnn said passing the buck.

Walking away into the dreary afternoon, I returned to my cellblock frustrated. On the one hand, I had a job. This alone puts me in a favored catagory here in this institution. Most men would change places with me in a heartbeat.

Kitchen jobs are notorious as the place to "swag". Stealing state property like sugar, meat and vegitables is considered swagging. Inmates steal fruit and sugar to manufacture a kind of fermented alcohol concoction called hooch.

Prisoners who are caught stealing are fired. Often they are given a disciplinary report and sent for a few days to the hole. Men here in MCI-Shirley are willing to take the hit of a D-report and a couple of days in the Special Management Unit to earn extra money selling swag to the general population. There is money to be made and reputations as a rebel to be earned.

Prison life is busy with acquaintances. Jobs in these places are often given to favored inmates based on fast loosely developed relationships. Convicts friendly with long time trusty's and corrections officers who may supervise assignments are given preferential assignments.

MCI-Shirley could be the most democratic facility when it comes to job assignments. Letters to the program director are read and acted upon. Also, men in this camp

may speak with jail administrators during the afternoon happy hour. On deputy superintendent McAnn's suggestion I revisited happy hour to speak with the officer in charge of job assignments.

Under a painted blue sky prisoners gathered forming a long impatient line. I met with Sargeant Schedin, pronounced Sha-Dean, a tall woman in a deep blue uniform; long blond hair blowing in the wind. She was harried and frenetic. She stood next to the superintendent of the facility with a pen and paper in her hand ready for another happy hour in Shirley World. "I'm uncomfortable working in the kitchen," I said immediately.

Men stood patiently, the weather allowed inmates and administrators some comfort from a recent cold snap. I took a moment to reflect on my concerns in relation to the mission of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. The DOC mission is "to promote public safety by managing offenders; provide care and appropriate programming in preparation for a successful reentry into the community." I simply wanted to ask for a re-assignment to some other job besides the kitchen.

"An easy job is being made difficult by a few disrespectful coworkers," I told Schedin. She took my name and told me in no uncertain terms the kitchen is where I will stay if I want to work in Shirley World. "Jobs outside of the kitchen are based on seniority." I was told. "You have no seniority." The sargeant was blunt. It was clear I was whistling in the wind if I thought I would just get another job assignment anytime soon.

In the short time I spent with the assignment officer, the growing group of disgruntled prisoners were impatient to approach her. My minute was over, and so I left. I went directly to work on the serving line: lunch was a hamburger with soup and a roll.

It occurred to me what I really wanted was a little custodial job in a housing unit.

A job working for cellblock officer sweeping the floor and mopping. These custodial janitor jobs pay one dollar a day and offer five days good time. Basically, the same rate and good time allowance as the kitchen job which I'm growing daily to despise.

Wanting a job and getting a job is difficult. "We have a waiting list." Said the correctional officer I approached. "Our workers have been doing this for years." He said.

No wonder there is so much apathy here in MCI-Shirley. A look at the workers in the general library is a picture of old age. Gray haired men, most in their sixties, confidently assume their places behind desks and effortlessly do their jobs daily.

Speaking with the school counselor Dennis, a tall academic administrator, I'm told, "this institution's strategy is to come up with programs using existing resources."

Dennis is as proud of the accomplishments of his education programs as he is guarded about discussing efforts to broaden them. "One of our smart general education instructors has established an advanced math class on her own time for students hungry and eager for mathematics at a level beyond that required for the G.E.D."

At one time this facility had an academic relationship with Mount Wachusett Community College. Sadly, there is no longer a college opportunity offered to prisoners of this institution. Grants like TAP and PELL have all but been eliminated from prisons coast to coast due to draconian political budget cuts affecting those behind bars.

"We wish we had more space, staff and budget," Dennis told me. "But there's a battle at the State House, and [budget] priorities dictate need."

The commissioner of the Department of Corrections, Luis S. Spencer, is a proponent of education behind bars, so I'm told. "He has the governors ear," says Dennis just before making a point about good time.

There is a battle going on for good time. This battle inflates waiting lists. Education and other programs which offer five to ten days worth of good time per month are highly sought.

Convicts participating in school classes, for example, are intrinsically motivated. School is not mandatory.

"To get good time credit," the school counselor says, "inmates must participate %80 percent of their time to classroom work."

Limited seating and not a lot of space to offer additional courses hinder opportunity. MCI-Shirley does what it can with what it has to offer. Instructors are considerate professionals who offer superb educational opportunities under the circumstances.

Perhaps a glimpse of the barbershop program may offer an example of what seems to be what is right and what is wrong with the current model facing students and administrators.

The Apprentice Barber License is a popular trade opportunity here in MCI-Shirley. Inmates jockey for participation. One thousand hours are required for the valuable barber license which may mean the difference between working upon release or falling through the cracks of the system. Offenders participate five days a week for ten to eleven months. There are just ten barber chairs in the classroom.

Inmate student barbers practice and learn by cutting hair of fellow prisoners. The program is run ably by a charming and knowledgeable woman named Lisa who supervises about ten students and a long line of convict clients who wait patiently their turn. For all intents and purposes, this barbershop is the real deal. It is a professionally run operation equal to any found in any neighborhood across the country.

A long look at the physical plant making up this sprawling camp is a view of opportunity diminished. These camps permit prisoners a unique chance to concentrate on themselves. The notion a mind is a terrible thing to waste is especially poignant to these expensive institutions.

For the first time ever, for many here, these convicts may address their futures, their goals; there are few distractions.

Prisons in Massachusetts, like those nationwide, vary with programs and industry available to general population inmates. Each correctional facility provides or denies educational, trade, jobs and services based upon individual needs, infrastructure and penological pedagogy. In the Cedar Junction maximum security institution which today is part reception, part long term, license plates for the Commonwealth are stamped. Formerly called Walpole State Prison, this aged clink is home to a significant number of highly paid cadre.

At MCI-Norfolk, another old clink, Boston University has a strong satellite college opportunity. A popular music program attracts inmate students. MCI-Gardner another medium security facility, is well known to provide an inmate farmer program allowing convicts their own small plot of land to grow seasonal vegetables, herbs and flowers.

Here in Shirley, there is a horticulture class. Horticulture's a cost effective trade limited to prisoners of the 275 inmate minimum security facility just across the street from this fifteen hundred offender institution.

The closest Shirley medium has to a horticulture program is a grounds maintenance cadre who work to beautify the drab prefabricated frontage of many of the buildings and common areas.

Horticulture trades may be under-exploited, but inmate group activities are plentiful. Prisons throughout Massachusetts organize and manage various self help groups such as Veterans Affairs, a weekly encounter group for those inmates who have served in the armed forces - although all are welcome to attend.

Veterans Affairs meetings are held on Tuesdays in the massive vocational building which houses the chapel, sewing industry, and an eclectic mix of official and inmate run groups.

Covicts in the Veteran's group talk about diverse topics ranging from post traumatic stress syndrom and medical concerns which seem particularly relevant to this aging general population. Vet's here feel, almost exclusively, that the VA hospital system is a better choice for medical care than say services provided by the Department of Corrections. During one meeting recently, the "sergeant-at-arms" turned group discussion to mandatory minimum sentencing concerns and offered outlets for prison writers to submit their stories.

Long timer groups, like Veteran's Affairs, include Lifers, or those facing decades of incarceration. Prison officials are receptive to listening to new ideas for self-help, especially proposals which may involve inmate labor. A small job means some offender may be distracted from destructive behavior such as gang activity and drug use. Drugs and gangs are particularly prevalent here in Shirley World.

These institutions understand their unique role within society today. Prisons reflect neighborhoods. Modern American culture has all but embraced values promulgated in these vast obscure behemoths. Correctional facilities are sprawling sterile guarded facilities which must be used for more than simply warehousing bodies until some far off eventual release date and uncertain future.



Good news came to Shirley World recently. This institution received a grant to establish a basic computer repair course.

Grant money partnered with Cisco Systems, the technology powerhouse, has been charged with establishing a "geek squad" style diagnostic and forensic repair opportunity for about twelve to twenty-five inmate students. On completion of a ten month workshop, a certificate will be issued.

Certificate programs are highly sought after. Certification is tangible. Offenders may hold their hard earned certificates in their hands knowing their time has not been wasted. Certificates can be presented to parole boards and prospective employers alike.

Overcrowded conditions may hinder some offenders, others merely accept long waiting lists as a challenge, an unpleasant part of doing time. Apathy lives in all prisons everywhere. But so do dreams and hope. Shirley World is better managed in many ways than most other correctional facilities. Much of the success here falls on the shoulders of civilian staff and volunteers.

Civilian employee's and volunteers are considerate capable men and women. Each day these teachers and visitors walk beneath deadly razor wire and through perimeters of chain link fencing; and many inmates are grateful to them for doing this.

Like the offenders they help, these diligent professionals work under the eyes of correction's officers and unblinking closed circuit security camera's in perhaps the most unnatural work environment imaginable.

Lately, my life working in the kitchen has grown more tolerable. Gone is the hostile work climate I encountered when I was first assigned. Something resembling acceptance and distance has developed. Taking a long hard look at life here in Shirley World, mopping a floor in the kitchen is better than idle hours wasting away in a cell or walking circles in the yard, or just staring hopelessly beyond the chain link fence.

The End