

Parole: The Path Forward

By James C. Moody

In 1983, the state of Washington passed the Sentencing Reform Act (SRA) which, among other things did away with parole here in our state. The unintended consequence of this, the inmates behavior, good or bad, was no longer a deciding factor when it came to setting their respective release dates. Parole incentivised and rewarded good behavior.

Now, the state legislature is considering a bill which would bring parole back to our state, a much needed reform. The "Second Chance bill", as its called would provide a modified parole board, which would convene every two years to review and evaluate the inmates behaviors, good or bad, as well as his or hers active participation in rehabilitation programs. This is a much needed reform, and a win-win situation, that would benefit both the offenders and an increasingly over-crowded prison system.

In 2014, California implemented a pilot program to address prison overcrowding, called "Prison Without Bars". The inmates, after serving an appropriate amount of time behind bars were then released to a half-way house after being fitted with a new generation of ankle monitoring device. The technology not only provides an enhanced

level of security, knowing every minute the exact GPS location of the parolee, but now comes equipped with a new feature, it reads the perspiration on the skin, and if they ingest any illegal substances whatsoever, it signals their community corrections officer alerting them to the violation. A technological innovation that will not only help to alleviate the community's concerns, but will further support and enforce the parolee in their efforts to stay clean and sober.

Additionally, this innovative program provides for counseling to address the myriad needs of each individual covering all bio, psycho, social issues. Parolees who have extensive mental health concerns, paired with co-existing condition of substance abuse, along with educational needs and job skills training. And if all this sounds expensive you would be surprised to learn that the total cost of this program is one-half the cost, per person, of a years incarceration. That's a 50% savings per inmate while producing real, lasting results, a stable, functioning productive tax paying member of society.

If you are looking for the most effective penological theory of prison management, a very successful one I might add, one only has to look to the European-Scandinavian system. The television program "60 minutes" aired an eye-opening expose on their nations prison, traveling to three different institutions

showcasing a decidedly progressive system, coupled with a egalitarian mindset, concerning its approach to crime and punishment.

The director of Germany's prisons spoke to 60 minutes, about how his country views differ from our own, with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration to society, over a punitive, punishment centric approach. I paraphrase, "We still see them (inmates) as equally valued members of our society. We want them to take responsibility for what they have done wrong, then we want to quickly and effectively, as possible, return them to their community's. It's important they not lose their place in our society, after all, they have made right, the wrong, why should we continue to hold them in contempt?"

When we contrast and compare Germany's view and approach concerning criminal justice, with that of our own, you can't help but see how harsh and overly punitive our system is by comparison. And to top it off, Germany has one of the lowest rates of recidivism in the industrialized world, while ours is by far the highest.

Which raises the question - Why do we have such a high rate of recidivism? What are we doing, or more importantly, not doing, that's resulting in a full 2/3 returning to prison. The National Council on

Alcoholism and Substance Abuse (NCAAS) states that 85% of those who are incarcerated are there due to addiction. Many have untreated mental illness in what is known as, "Co-existing Condition" which is some form of mental disorder, "bipolar, manic-depression etc. Coupled with substance abuse. When you add this to lack of education, sub-standard job skills and little, if any community support, is it any wonder they return to prison?

What is needed is a comprehensive approach. In the medical profession, there is a concept known as, "Continuity of Care", this is where the various disciplines, primary physician, surgeon, radio-therapist oncologist, all come together, in a coordinated effort to insure the patient has the best possible outcome.

For those coming out of prison, after years of incarceration, equipped with shockingly inadequate skill set, facing a complex web of confusing obstacles, in a technologically advanced world that has left them behind, coupled with the aforementioned Co-existing Condition, you can only imagine how daunting of a challenge this would be.

A good place to start would be to transition the parolee from prison into a long-term intensive in-patient treatment facility to focus on what got them into prison in the first place, namely

Substance abuse. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) states that every dollar spent on treatment saves seven dollars in future incarceration costs. (This is the model for which I advocate and wholeheartedly support.)

Now the parolee, equipped with the tools to succeed, and a stable platform of recovery from which to build, guided by knowledgeable and effective support system, can then proceed with confidence into their new lives.

And for those of us sentenced under the draconian three-strikes law, parole will be nothing short of a new lease on life. A chance to show we have grown and matured over our time, and most importantly, broke the cycle of addiction and became an active participant ^{in our} ~~the~~ recovery program.

Now some may feel that all of this, parole, counseling, treatment, is just being "soft on crime," coddling the offender. This would be a case of "prima facie evidence." Far from being soft, parole puts the "onus" squarely on us, the inmate. We know it is up to us to take up the tools given and work for our success. And personally I can think of nothing more liberating or motivating.