

It is our hope to present issues concerning offenders in the Missouri Department of Corrections and find possible solutions. Topics covered in Focus Group 1 included: incentives, probation and parole, Missouri Vocational Enterprises (MVE), offender finances, staff/offender communication, educational opportunities, medical concerns, and the Therapeutic Community (TC). We hope to have future focus groups in order to give Missouri offenders a voice for positive changes in the prison system.

When an offender receives a lengthy sentence and is under the 85% law, there is a feeling of hopelessness from the start. There is very little opportunity for classes and self improvement due to most courses are offered to offenders closest to release. The attitude of most offenders in this group really don't care because they have to do 85% regardless of their behavior. Offenders want to be recognized for their growth and change. Incentives are highly sought. Honor dorms appear to be most appreciated by this group of offenders.

Probation and parole has been long viewed as an unfair system. Offenders are issued a booklet with the Salient Factor Score guidelines. The graph appears to be straight forward with three different percentage months to serve but that is not being followed. An offender with exceptional behavior and hopes of receiving an outdate according to the SFS, is let down when the board decides otherwise. The common rumor is that P & P lets the trouble makers out because they (P&P) know they'll be back. Most in this group have witnessed the revolving door of DOC. There is a collective feeling that the parole board is like "being on trial" again. While the conviction is over with, the main focus should be on the individual's rehabilitation. But a common reason for denial of parole has been "circumstances surrounding the present offense". In this case, any new information concerning the crime should be allowed in the P&P proceedings to offset the initial SAR report. There is no consistency in the parole board's decisions and this created great animosity towards the justice system.

There is a feeling that MVE has lost its function training offenders for outside employment rather than focusing on its own profitability. The highest paid position (lead man) has been at 71 cents since at least 2002. While the opportunity for gainful employment, during incarceration, is very beneficial to many offenders whom have never held a real job, there needs to be a merit increase for longevity. The lead man position includes supervising offender skills and safety, training new employees, and being responsible for quality products. Once a lead man completes the Department of Labor Hours for the Apprenticeship Program, there should be a merit increase in order to demonstrate that with hard work comes reward in the work place. Offenders that are not eligible for a work release program depend on their MVE job to save money in preparation for release. Savings generated while in prison greatly assist the transition back into society.

State Tip-\$8.50/month, has long been in need for a boost. One offender in the focus group remembers state tip at \$7.50 a month in 1985. The price of a US postage stamp has doubled in that time frame. Hygiene products, postage, telephone time, and a comfort item are maxed each month. Canteen prices constantly go up and with the addition of taxes, offenders result to the criminal and addictive behaviors they learned from the streets in order to survive. The generic hygiene products are much smaller and do not last compared to higher priced items.

All offenders in the focus group have experienced and or witnessed verbal abuse from staff. When asked if this was just an issue with just correctional officers, the answer was no. Most offenders have come from broken homes without positive role models. Positive affirmations

from staff go very far when an offender has been put down most of his/her life by authority figures. All agree that their experiences have been dehumanizing when approached by some staff members and being in a position where if a response was made, it would result in administrative segregation. Damage created from improper staff remarks ignites the attitude of "us vs. them". We recommend better education and training for staff with emphasis on social services. There should be a system of checks and balances when reporting offensive behavior by staff without fear of retaliation. More positive remarks by staff, in regards for offender's achievements, are highly encouraged. Positive reinforcements are a sure building block to rehabilitation.

Since the dissolution of the Pell Grant, secondary educational opportunities have stalled. Offenders obtaining their High School Equivalency (HSE) that have previously disregarded education are primed to further their education when they graduate. Their minds are primed with the challenges of studying and testing. Many other offenders desire to further educate themselves but lack the necessary funds. Offenders who participate in correctional education programs have a 43% lower chance of reentry to prison than those who do not according to a study by Rand Corporation. The study also states that for every \$1 investment in prison education it reduces incarceration cost by \$4 to \$5 during the first three years of post release. As tobacco will be banned next year, it would be a prime opportunity to replace yard activities with text books and study groups. Prison is known as a place to get your "street education". We want to change that perception to be a place not only to take responsibility for your crime, but to gain much needed life experiences and skills.

The medical system has long been known for its inadequate care. It is well known that regardless of your complaint, the universal response is to "drink more water". It is generally known, and suggested by staff, to just keep putting in a Health Services Request (HSR) form for the same complaint until they act. In the focus group, three offenders have had self take medication cards cancelled, for no reason, and had to put in repeated HSR's to try and get the medications prescribed again. A main topic in the group was offenders being brushed over by medical for various complaints and then finally getting diagnosed with late stage cancer with no hopes for treatment. A system of accountability for misdiagnosis should be in place for medical care. Offenders are not given the freedom of a second opinion while incarcerated, so aggressive diagnosis of acute conditions should be warranted.

The Therapeutic Community (TC) also called The Genesis Project was unanimously agreed upon that it is the best thing experienced in MO DOC. All offenders in the group have been incarcerated at various institutions. TC has a smaller population of like-minded offenders who agree to live in a positive environment. A structure system is in place to handle: community issues, complaints, cleaning, education, and activities for the wing. TC gives offenders an opportunity to reach higher than expected by: creating/facilitating classes, mentoring new members, and holding leadership (structure) positions in the community. Unlike other housing units, these aspects give an offender a sense of purpose and meaning while incarcerated. The Therapeutic Community offers offenders: respect, noise control, cleanliness, and expectations while abiding by the 7 Right Living Concepts of the wing. These Right Living Concepts is pivotal in the rehabilitation efforts of the MO DOC. The Genesis Project utilizes offenders with life experience skills and professional certifications by: an accomplished artist teaching art classes, a former paramedic instructing first aid classes, and offenders with college degrees holding an

Education Hour to assist those that are interested in bettering themselves on any given topic (math, history, or literature). While it is difficult to get outside educators in the prison system, utilizing those offenders with such credentials is the most cost effective means to teaching inside the institution. The Therapeutic Community gives offenders a chance to work on their faults that involved them in the legal system while greatly giving them a chance for self improvement.

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My Original had all 7
members initial this page. This
Shows all agreed on what I
Submitted.

