

"Prison Ethics in California"

It's been said that it takes two to tango, and I've found this to be true in most aspects of life. Human nature is designed to seek companionship, and few ventures that we embark upon aren't made easier or more efficient by a partner with the same goal or intention. This thought is especially true when it comes to prison reform.

The penitentiary system by nature is a place of division. Various races, or tribes, band together for the strength in numbers as they compete for limited resources. A phenomenon that more often than not leads to unrest. While the custody staff seek to control and prevent such actions, leading to a broad distrust of all factions within this micro-community known as the prison yard.

So then how do we go about developing the trust and cooperation necessary to exact a sincere atmosphere for change within this beast that has been thriving in its negativity for close to a century? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? After all a house divided can not stand on its own.

The inmate population has taken great steps to overcome this hurdle within the last decade, reaching at great lengths to rise above the stigma placed on us by society and fueled by the California Corrections & Police Officers Association (C.C.P.O.A) propaganda. We fought to end a 30+ year policy of solitary confinement for those deemed a threat to the departments "agenda". We came together to form a treaty ending all racial hostilities on these prison yards. Seeking to create an environment more conducive to the harmony needed to bring about change within the hearts of these Men and Women. In doing so we have blurred the racial lines established in the 1950s, and have significantly reduced the violence amongst us. Allowing empathy and compassion to blossom within this otherwise dark environment. We have made great progress, but we remain quite far from our goal.

So then, what stands in our way? What is needed to overcome the past and transform this place into an environment of healing? First and foremost we must stay the course and not allow the roadblocks we encounter to detour nor divide us. It is absolutely imperative that all factions within these walls remain steadfast and cooperative with one another. This especially includes the custody staff, who for the most part still remain sceptical of our sincerity and seem to remain stagnated in their cynicism. What kind of progress can we hope for if it is not recognized by our keepers, and their opinions and tactics for dealing with us remain the same? If nothing changes, nothing changes!

So how do we move this Green Wall that stands between us and the change necessary for a better life? We must first understand their position. Most people fear change, they become comfortable in the monotony of habit. No matter how unjust ones habitual actions may be, to step outside of ones square is to burst their bubble of security. The sad reality is, to bring about honest and sincere change in the hearts of these men and women in prison is a threat to the job security of the correctional officers. If the people confined within these walls truly change and stop coming to prison, what need is there for the overwhelming number of CDCR employees? Our desire to break the destructive cycle of prisons revolving door stands in juxtaposition with their financial security. This is something the C.C.P.O.A and the administration is quite aware of and evident in some of the recent policy changes. Namely their scheme to reintegrate the sensitive needs, or protective custody, population with the general population. In essence throwing the sex offenders and tattletales back to the wolves of whom they fled from in the first place, many of whom caused great pain and distress to those they left behind because of CDCRs debriefing policy. A policy that required information to the detriment of someone else in order to receive the safety they sought in protective custody. Just as the violence among the general population had been reduced drastically, the administration in Sacramento contrived a way to entice more violence and justify the need for their over-paid and under-educated staff. All in the name of "Justice".

It baffles me that the only educational requirement for a correctional officer is a G.E.D. A job so integral in the repair and rehabilitation of the minds of so many broken people, most of whom have been failed by the system in the first place, falls in the hands of individuals who are required the grasp of an 8th grade reading and writing ability. A minimum of a Bachelors Degree in Education is necessary to work in a public school and mold young minds. Yet an uneducated farm worker can be given the responsibility by the State of California to keep order and instill the compassion to create a healing environment in prison. One must ask themself, "are we failing these men and women by holding fast to outdated prison tactics"? There is an absolute need to change the face and approach to the prison system, and it should start with the boots on the ground.

Have we not learned anything from the civil unrest over the past couple years? That harsh and unfair police tactics have no place within a compassionate society. All across this great nation police agencies and municipalities have begun to see the light. Retraining their officers to conduct themselves in

empathy and compassion, requiring of them a working knowledge of psychology and conflict resolution. Yet here in California's Department of Corrections and "Rehabilitation" we remain stagnant in a bygone era approach. Our correctional staff view the prison system as nothing more than a warehouse to store the dregs of society. Should we not expect more from a department that pays their officers in the upwards of \$90,000 a year?

I say YES! If ever was there an agency in need of the complete overhaul of a sweeping reform it is the California Department of Corrections! This is something I believe is beginning to be recognized by the Honorable members of our State Assembly and Senate. But to do so one must come up against the leviathan that is the C.C.P.O.A. One of the most powerful and influential unions in the Nation, and certainly the most powerful in this state, with the ability to make or break a politicians' career. Why else do Bills aimed at righting the wrongs of CDCR policies, such as SB1064 and AB990, get vetoed at the Governors desk despite being passed favorably in both the House and Senate?

My fellow Californians, we must come together to right this grave miscarriage of justice, and create a new era of prison ethics for the sake of our young men and women. This is not to say we must ignore crime and the hurt it causes, there must be consequences for breaking the standards of civilized law. But these consequences need not undo the compassion and humanity of a civilized society. We have to rethink our approach to the entire prison system, that it may become a place of healing and redemption. A place that rights the wrongs done unto society, while helping those who offend to understand what led them down such a destructive path in the first place. Our prison system must become a reflection of our goals for society, and not a place where its inhabitants are viewed as sub-human.

I leave you with this final thought... Are we sending these broken men and women to a Department of Corrections or Corruption?