

The Rehabilitation Myth

When I was committed to prison in 2018 for a sexual offense, I was told that my custodial sentence was not only punitive, it was rehabilitative and would prepare me to be a law abiding citizen when I'm released. It's a common saying, that you're being rehabilitated when you're sent to prison. It's a good idea, and it was the intent of Congress that it should work exactly like that. But as I quickly discovered, the implementation was about as far from what Congress intended as anything could possibly be.

Upon arrival, new prisoners are quickly screened to determine if they have a high school education. If not, it is mandatory they complete a GED while in prison. What a great idea! I was called to the education department and told I would have to enroll in the GED program. I told them I had completed high school and even had a college degree. But none of this mattered because it did not fit their "checkbox" system. Only after having my high school record sent in could I convince them I did not need a GED. That wasn't a great start to rehabilitation, but I didn't worry too much since it was quickly solved.

However, the systemic failures began to show. I was recommended to take "21st Century Money Management", "Parenting", and the sex offender treatment program. I signed up for everything recommended.

Money management is just a DVD you watch on your own time, so it was easy to complete. But, the material presented was beyond belief. Do they really think I'm being prepared for reentry by discussing a "new" technology called a debit card and emphasizing how important it is to balance your checkbook every month? Even before I was locked up, everybody already used online banking and payment by mobile phone was wildly popular - but there wasn't even a mention of this on the DVD.

In the case of Parenting, I've been waiting years now and still can't get in. It's supposed to teach me valuable parenting skills, like how to be a parent from prison. I was a good parent before I was locked up and by the time I can finally take this class it will be too late to apply to my prison experience - so how does that help? Similarly, I'm now finding that sex offender treatment won't be provided until just before release. I can't think of anything more backwards than delaying mental health treatment of any kind!

But, I go into my progress review every six months as I'm told. At first I expected something individualized to help me. But what I'm finding are that the recommended programs are just parroted over and over again to each inmate regardless of need or if they have previously completed it. I completed money management years ago when it was first recommended. Each review of my progress includes a recommendation to take it (again).

It took me a long time to realize that programming recommendations were just "checkboxes" for the staff to complete. What they actually contained was unimportant to them. There is no concern about individualism or rehabilitative need. Everyone gets the same basic recommendations. Once, I mentioned to staff I had completed what was recommended and asked if there was other recommendations. I was simply told to "stay busy" (meaning stay out of trouble).

So, if you're in the same situation as me, I'm sorry, but you won't find rehabilitation here. It's all going to be a series of checkboxes for the staff to show they did their job by making recommendations. With that in mind, agree to participate in programs you're asked to take, but don't expect to get much from them, if anything, in the form of rehabilitation.