

Peg Newan - DOC Chaplain/BSH

First, I should fully disclose that I am a chaplain for the DOC but I am here on my day off, on my own time, as a private citizen, concerned about the welfare of our brothers and sisters who are returning to the community. I am not here in any official capacity

For those who have done time, coming home is an overwhelming experience. Many need to find a place to live and secure job. Unless they live in a city, they have to figure out transportation. They face countless tasks: getting medical care, setting up a bank account, getting a telephone, getting some appropriate clothes to wear. And, if they have been away for a more than just a couple years, they face the prospect of learning new technology including how to use a smart phone and a computer. Even turning on a television is not as easy as it once was.

Sometimes, harder than those concrete tasks is rebuilding broken relationships, making new friends, finding healthy things to do with their time. We know that a person's CORI is an obstacle when it comes to finding employment and sometimes housing, but serving time also carries a stigma and often a person has to deal with their own shame making emotional support very important.

We know all these things. The needs of those returning home from prison are enormous and our various government and non-profit agencies and systems don't come close to meeting them all. Yet we have this huge untapped resource: an army of chaplains and volunteers who are experienced in working with men and women in prison. They know a lot about the unique needs and circumstances of these men and women. They are perfectly positioned to be mentors and guides. Chaplains for example, can help churches set up programs to recruit and train more volunteers to work with our returning citizens as they transition back into society. Volunteers can help men and women as they make the transition back to their communities. But this is currently not allowed.

There are certainly important security and safety concerns to consider while amending the current regulations.. Perhaps re-entry contact needs to be done in the context of re-entry programs that provide training and support for volunteers and support chaplains in setting and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. I believe that these kinds of details can be sorted out by bringing together a workgroup of DOC staff and experienced volunteers and chaplains.

# Proposal to Allow Post-Release Contact

## Background

Because DOC staff and volunteers are prohibited from having contact with former inmates, a vital resource is denied to men and women as they are re-entering their communities, a time when their need for support and assistance is most acute.

Across the country, prison volunteers are serving as post-release mentors, eg recovery coaches, literacy coaches, life skill coaches, etc. They are well positioned to help former offenders find housing, jobs, medical treatment and other vital services. Similarly, chaplains employed in correctional setting are uniquely able to provide both spiritual and practical support to returning citizens through their churches and non-profit organizations.

Chaplains often face challenging situations as many former inmates join local religious communities - parishes, congregations etc. that have strong prison ministry programs. This creates issues when prisoners come into contact with prison volunteers and chaplains. Further, chaplains are well positioned to direct volunteers as they know which organizations have sufficient structure and oversight of volunteers.

## Specific Proposal

Recognizing that there are legitimate concerns that the DOC must address, we propose that a working group be formed to look at what the best practice would be for staff and volunteers to provide post-release assistance. Safeguards would need to be put in place to make such a change in a responsible manner. The group may consider contact through organizations and while other kinds of contact would remain at the discretion of the superintendent.

## Current Status

The document known as "The Blue Book," titled "Rules and Regulations Governing All Employees of the Massachusetts Department of Correction," prohibits staff from having contact with former inmates, page 13, rule 8, section (c). 103 CMR 485.14 (2) requires volunteers to follow "rules and regulations governing persons employed by" correctional institutions. In effect, neither staff nor volunteers can have contact with former inmates. The remedy would be to amend the CMR's to allow contact as described above.