

October 30, 2015

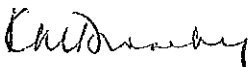
To Whom It May Concern,

I was pleased to learn Governor Baker has directed that each agency of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts conduct open dialogues and listening sessions regarding the agency's regulations for interested stakeholders.

As a former Commissioner, I was approached by several organizations and asked to DOC support a proposal to the DOC requesting that a work group that includes stakeholders be established to draft amendments to the DOC's regulations regarding the role of volunteers and chaplains during prisoner re-entry. Specifically, it will be requested that stakeholders work with the DOC to draft revisions to the regulations so they better reflect the full potential of support that volunteers can offer prisoners as they return to society. As currently written, the regulations prohibit DOC volunteers from having post-release contact with offenders. Any post-release contact with a former inmate must be reported by the volunteer to the DOC. Seeking community support, some former inmates join local religious communities - parishes, congregations, etc. Some of these communities have strong prison ministry programs. This creates issues when prisoners come into contact with volunteers. Contact between former prisoners and volunteers is prohibited even though long-time prison volunteers may be uniquely positioned to help offenders find housing, jobs, medical treatment, etc. This is especially true for long termers who may have outlived their families, friends and community contacts. The DOC chaplains are in the position to know which community-based religious programs have sufficient structure and oversight of volunteers to be of help to offenders as they navigate the challenging re-entry phase. Across the country, prison volunteers are serving as post-release mentors, eg recovery coaches, literacy coaches, life skill coaches., etc. The "ask" here is that the regulations be amended to reflect the administration's expressed commitment to re-entry. It is understood that any changes to the regulations must include language that addresses the DOC's focus on safety and security.

I am happy to join my voice with these organizations and offer my support for the convening of a work group that includes representatives from these groups to explore amending the regulations to realize the full potential that volunteers can bring to the table. Allowing volunteers and chaplains to work with former inmates in programs that are designed to respect the DOC's safety concerns, would go a long way toward assisting men and women as they return to their communities, thereby reducing recidivism.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Dennehy

Former Commissioner, MA Dept of Correction

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 including stakeholders 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.