

Humanity, Hope and Legitimacy

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Later in my 33 year career, I organized my thinking about corrections around the themes of humanity, hope, and legitimacy. Washington prisons are intentionally humane. Programs like the Sustainability in Prisons Project bring nature and animals inside. Inmates keep connected with their children through Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts Beyond Bars and family events. The If Project connects inmates with mentors. Correctional Industries trains and then assists releasing inmates find living wage jobs. Collaboration with community and technical colleges allow for education to start within prisons and continue following release.

A lack of humanity breeds hate and anger, which leads to brutality and violence. By maintaining humane facilities, we keep inmates and our staff safe. When these inmates go home, they will face all of the same struggles we all have: balancing work and family; exercising control over personal weaknesses; setting and achieving goals. Only they manage while also carrying the burden of being a felon and all that that entails: ineligibility for jobs and housing; gaps in employment history; paying back legal financial obligations that accrue interest at a rate of 12%; and adjusting to an environment that moves much faster than life in prison.

Though these struggles will be raw and continuous, this is where hope comes into play. It starts in prisons, offering inmates the opportunity to transform. Inmates start to see themselves as students, as trainers, as people with career and life goals who contribute to society. Hope is crucial for correctional staff as well. Staff need opportunities to grow professionally, to believe their work environment will continually improve, that they will be able to provide for their families, and that their work is meaningful. They need to know that the people in their care can go back to their communities and be equipped to not come back.

Which leads me to legitimacy. It's a concept we talk a lot about in corrections. It's crucial for corrections officers to have legitimacy. Legitimacy is earned by being fair, firm, and consistent. You don't play favorites and you don't mess with someone just because you have authority. You demonstrate competency and commitment in your work. The greatest thing correctional staff can do to maintain their own safety and the safety of their co-workers is demonstrate legitimacy in the eyes of inmates. A correctional system must also strive to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the people in its care, their families, their victims and victims' families, and the public.

To increase its legitimacy as a system of "corrections", it must give people leaving its facilities better opportunities to succeed. The old, but still around practice, of giving a releasing inmate \$40 in "gate money" and a bus ticket does not demonstrate a commitment to public safety. It is delegitimizing in the eyes of the person who is releasing and the community to which they return, which expects that the department has done everything it can to keep that returning community member from committing new crimes.

There is much that needs to be done. Washington State spends \$850 million on corrections each year. For this investment, we should all expect that people leave our prison system better than when they went in. This includes ensuring that progress someone made in prison carries with them to the outside and they have the support necessary to be a contributing member of their community. We should think critically about the work of corrections and the work of reentry and commit to building more humanity, more hope and more legitimacy into our correctional system.

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