

December 28, 2011

Re: Open Letter

Ladies and Gentleman:

This is my fifth attempt at informing the public of the deteriorating environment and administrative attitudes within the Alaska Correctional System. What is different on this occasion, is that I am mindful to keep items that can be used defensively within reach as I write; for as I write I am waiting to be attacked and assaulted¹. In credulously I am not alone in this predicament. I and three of my co-workers in HCF's treatment program have had "hits" proffered, accepted, and paid for against us. Our transgressions are the breach of the "convict code" in the performance of our duties as group and program facilitators.

The "code" prohibits us from identifying and challenging core issues, core values, thinking errors, roadblocks to change, and tactics used to avoid change in other prisoners. The "code" requires us to provide a path of least resistance through the treatment program so that each can attain a certificate of completion, which is seen as the ticket to release and the resumption of old behaviors. To do otherwise is considered "messing" with another prisoner's time, being a "cop," and being a "rat." These are attitudes and values that I completely understand, for most of my twenty-five plus years of incarceration, I too embraced them. It comes down to the subconscious belief that if living this way (as an addict/criminal) is no longer acceptable to you, and I am still OK with it, there must be something wrong with me. So we as addicts and criminals flip the indictment and assign the "weakness" to those who want a better life. What is new is the willingness to use violence and intimidation as roadblocks to keep those who want change, from freely being able to attempt it.

The Alaskan prisoner's exposure to more violent and criminalistic systems is a genie that cannot be put back in the bottle. However, that does not mean it's time to surrender to criminal tactics of violence and intimidation, to do so would be giving up on this and future generations. But before there can be any progress made against this riptide of corrosive attitudes, there must be some fundamental changes in the operational philosophies of both the private corrections industry and the Alaska Department of Corrections.

A for profit company's fiduciary obligation is to create a return on investment for its shareholders. Thus, the objective of private prisons is the maximization of profits. There are four housing units at GEO's HCF, each with approximately three-hundred beds. Since Geo realized it could operate two units with only one unit manager, there has never been more than three. When a case manager leaves, it routinely takes three or four months for them to be replaced. Correctional officer staffing levels are kept at such a level that radio calls for overtime volunteers are a daily event. In this month of December, the hand scanner used to track prisoner who have eaten in the cafeteria broke. Instead of having a spare on hand or purchasing a replacement, those who eat are being checked off a roster. This system has caused breakfast service to extend past 8 AM, lunch service to extend past 2 PM, and

¹ I began drafting this letter on 12/10, since then I have been getting conflicting information on whether the "Hit" against me and the other program facilitators was squashed or that it will happen when things cool off. However, whether it happens or not a morè has been breached and the damage done. The shadow of retribution is now a constant presence within the treatment community and has already, as I now realize, subconsciously affected my willingness to confront behaviors. Considering the mindset of newer incarcerants, it is just a matter of time until violent action against individual in the treatment community becomes a reality.

dinner service to extend past 8 PM. Since recalls are still at 10:25 AM, 3:45 PM, and 8:40 PM, and educational and religious movements are not conducted until meal services are complete, rehabilitative services have for all practical purposes ceased. All to save a few dollars on a scanner which was purchased to save pennies on meals.

Under the best of condition, when there is a full complement of four counselors, treatment counselors are expected to sixty hours of work in a forty hour work week. On August 4th one of the counselors took a six week medical leave and another was terminated. It wasn't until December 12th that treatment staff was up to what passes for full strength at HCF. During the intervening period the program was expected to carry a full load of clients. Since therapeutic reports and client files being kept current are a requirement of accreditation and easily verified the areas that suffered are counselor client contact and the discharge summaries of program graduates (discharge summaries take from six to eight hours to complete). Both of which are vital to the participants of the program.

Support for the treatment community beyond lip service is a rare commodity. The only involvement of administrative staff has been obligatory speeches at the twice yearly graduation ceremonies. Of which, the current warden had only appeared at the first of the three which have taken place in his tenure. Many promises are made to support the treatment of prisoners, few are kept. HCF doesn't even manage to regularly call the treatment pod first for meals. Being first would minimize the interference meal services have on treatment activities. For close to a year, TC had been promised an inmate use computer to assist with none confidential clerical tasks. While there a number of inmate use computers in other areas, HCF can find none to help ease the burden on their treatment staff; which would allow them to expend more energy on treatment related tasks. The cover your ass culture at HCF is also a hindrance to support for TC. Some unit managers over TC have taken micromanagement to the point where it squashes all initiative, making case managers reluctant to support TC goals and activities.

The most damaging failure of HCF is its refusal to isolate the TC from general population's predatory drug driven ethos. While scheduling recreation, feeding, and other institutional services would be complicated, and there would be the usual conflict over who covers the additional cost of isolating the community, the effort would pay exponential dividends. The only way I can explain the importance of isolation is to equate it to my experience in finding faith and spirituality. At the point in my incarceration when I found faith, I had over 40 years of prejudice toward those whom I saw as hiding behind the Bible. This created considerable conflict within me and I found I was unable to read the Bible or express any spiritual thoughts with the people I'd been doing time with. I had almost let go when I decided that I needed to cross another of my "old boundaries" and ask for help. This led me to move into the Faith Pod. In the Faith Pod I found an environment that supported my quest for spirituality. In my 18 months in the Faith pod I developed the confidence and strength to be comfortable with my new beliefs and ideals. The same holds true for those who are trying to give up criminal and drug addicted lifestyles. We all need a haven that allows each to try on new beliefs and give them time to become part of us without the pressures to stay the same that come from general population.

While we are housed in an out of state prison, what does or does not happen within its walls ultimately remains the responsibility of the Alaska Department of Corrections. Its representatives have been provided with copies of my previous letters and I have spoken directly with a number of DOC officials who have visited HCF, DOC cannot claim ignorance of the trends at HCF. Unfortunately,

the Department's failure to act is consistent with its history as documented by the Alaska ACLU². The person I hold most responsible for the conditions here is Director of Institutions Bryan Brandenburg. Mr. Brandenburg's most telling indication of his philosophy was his statement: that all I or anyone else have coming for making meaningful changes in our lives and conducting ourselves in a productive manner, is not being housed in the SHU (segregation). While it has rarely been expressed in words, this attitude has been pervasive during my incarceration. It almost seems that criminal behavior is rewarded and constructive behavior discouraged.

Suggested Solutions:

- 1) Legislation should be enacted that creates a fiduciary obligation for private prison contractors to support the rehabilitation of State prisoners in their custody.
- 2) Isolate the Treatment Community as much as possible. Meal service and recreational activities are necessary to individual health and emotional balance and need to be segregated. Religious services, educational classes, property pick up, and medical services are somewhat better supervised and could remain as they are.
- 3) Treatment staff needs to be increased or treatment beds reduced. At this time, there is a rash of relapse of recent TC graduates at HCF; both in areas of substance abuse and criminal/convict behavior. I attribute this trend primarily to the fact that these individuals were in the program when it was down to two counselors. There should be a cap of twelve clients for each counselor and ten for the director of the program. Numbers any higher than these seem to substantially impair the quality of treatment that each client receives.
- 4) Upon graduation, clients need to be removed from HCF as soon as possible. Graduates should have their furloughs expedited or at least moved to minimum security facility in Alaska. This takes us away from our cohorts and gives us a chance to build new peer relationships. While waiting, graduates should be housed in a somewhat segregated but more structured environment than general population.
- 5) There is a considerable inmate welfare fund at HCF derived from the vending machines placed here. Some of the funds should be spent on materials that could be transferred to the next institution that the TC program is moved to. These materials should include, but not be limited to: treatment resources, recreational equipment, computers, and job training resources.
- 6) The TC program should not be lock down until count clears at the 10:30 and 4:00 counts. TC should be counted and released to the day room to conduct therapeutic activities.
- 7) When the institution is on lockdown, TC counselors should not be used as support staff. Institutional lockdowns should be an opportunity for counselors to clear backlogs and do file maintenance.
- 8) Staff that are inclined to support treatment goals and activities should be encouraged and assigned to the treatment housing unit.

Even in its present under supported condition, the Therapeutic Community is effective and has considerable value. Making the TC more effective would not be difficult; the program is nowhere near achieving an economics of scale. It is not hard to see the conflict in interest the private corrections industry might have with the goal of rehabilitation. My examination of this conflict has caused me to question what the true long term goals of the Department of Corrections are: is it rehabilitation of the offender, or is it the expansion of their fiefdom.

If you find yourself with questions or concerns, please contact your legislator or the Department of Corrections.

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² "rethinking Alaska's Correctional Policy; AVOIDING AN EVERYDAY CRISIS" March 2010, ACLU of Alaska' www.akaclu.org