



Letter from the Director

People both inside and outside of prison often ask me what the California Reentry Program does. I decided it was a good idea to answer some frequently asked questions in this issue.

Why did you start the program?

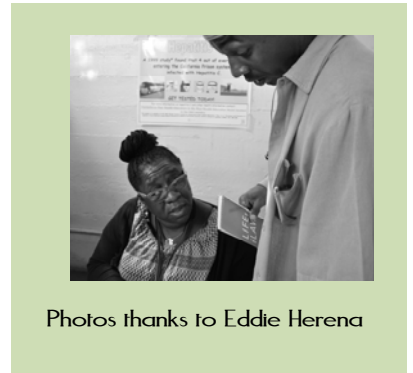
In 2003, I was helping run the then-college program (now, the Prison University Project) and I kept getting regular requests for reentry-related information. At first, I was confused because I was under the impression that the Department of Corrections had teams of “correctional counselors” who provided reentry resources. The men explained to me the counselors, instead, were responsible for keeping paperwork in their central files updated and assisting with issues related to that paperwork. Some would help them if time allowed, but it was rare. I gave a lot of thought to the idea of providing a volunteer-run program, comparing it to the idea of something provided by the prison at taxpayer cost. Although there are drawbacks to having a volunteer program - constant turnover and lack of expertise, for example - the

A Volunteer Speaks

I felt claustrophobic as I imagined a 10' x 8' cement room with no windows, clocks or internet. When the officer beckoned me over to the security checkpoint, I confessed to feeling nervous, not knowing what to expect as I stepped inside San Quentin State Prison for the first time three years ago.

I was initially drawn to prison, wondering if I would debunk the popular myths or experience the drama portrayed in shows and movies. A recurring theme in my life is to push the boundary of gender norms and expectations, which further propelled me to accept an unprecedented challenge of volunteering at an all-male correctional facility.

I had envisioned hardened criminals with scary face tattoos looking out through the bars. Instead, I saw a group of prisoners enjoying a game of horseshoes, while others gardened peacefully on the yard. For the first time, I was able to put the media image out of my head and recognize that inmates are human beings with a fundamental need for connection. A fluorescent-lit chapel was filled with inmates excited to be paired up with volunteers who would give them reentry advice. A client



Photos thanks to Eddie Herena

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I met on the first night, Chris, has been locked up for 13 years since he was 19.

Through him, I learned that newly-released prisoners get \$200 at the gate and are

“Thank you for giving me a place to stay I was prepared to live under a bridge.”

left on their own to find housing, look for work, and establish new lives. I continued meeting prisoners for a half an hour each, assessing their needs and providing custom solutions to each. The ability to add value from day one motivated me to come back each Thursday, eager to present information that would bring some hope to clients. Determined not to see Chris become homeless, I relentlessly called more than 20 transitional housing agencies before finding one in Monterey willing to work with him. Upon sharing the good news with

Chris, I saw his eyes fill with tears and he said: “Thank you for giving me a place to stay. I was prepared to live under a bridge.” Progress may be slow and the harsh reality of Chris’ future is looming large, but seeing my work directly boost his chance of success post-incarceration has given me the motivation to persevere.

The more prisoners I meet who have endured poverty, gangs and violence, the more I am convinced that they are often the product of their circumstances. This realization has not only amplified my appreciation for my family and friends, but also solidified my desire to contribute to public safety in my own way instead of allowing ignorance and fear to dominate my behavior.

The need for reentry services is one that is poorly addressed and I am motivated to help an underserved population one client at a time. ♦

Another Volunteer Speaks

Sometimes clients and others say, “Well, you’re happy to see your clients *here*, but what about when you see one of these guys out on the *streets*?” And here’s the answer: One day I was walking down a street in a major city in the Bay Area. I was crossing an alley and I heard, “HEY!” I didn’t give it much thought, and didn’t respond, but then I heard “Hey, aren’t you from San Quentin?” “That’s ME!” I thought and turned around to see a young man in a *very* nice car beaming at me. I went to talk to him and he told me that I had helped him find a job both in San Quentin and again before he got out. He proceeded to tell me that several years later he has the same job and is doing great all thanks to the California Reentry Program.

Of course much of this success was due to this man’s positive attitude, perseverance, and hard work—we merely got him started—and I didn’t hesitate to tell him that. It’s resilience, the success stories, the spirit of these men that keep all of us coming back for more. When we see living proof outside of prison, it motivates us all more than ever to serve so that our clients can lead, safe, healthy, happy lives. ♦



Photos thanks to Eddie Herena

Letter from the Director, continued

idea of community members voluntarily coming into a prison solely to help someone with plans for release seemed more robust and encouraging than anything government funded.

How often does your program run?

Reentry advising is provided Tuesday evening and Friday afternoon in one location, and Thursday evening in a second location. This ensures all mainline prisoners at San Quentin have easy access to our services. Our Tuesday program could be larger if we could use a bigger room, but space is at a premium for volunteer-run programs.

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Do you offer reentry advising at any additional prisons?

Unfortunately, we're unable to provide our services outside San Quentin. We are minimally-funded and we do not have full-time staff to implement expansion plans at this time. Sadly, we're also unable to answer any correspondence from other prisons.

Where do you find your volunteers?

Our volunteers generally find us online and come from all walks of life. We accept people of all ages and from all backgrounds and interests. We have entrepreneurs, real estate agents, tech workers, students and budding social workers and attorneys. We feel a variety of backgrounds, ages and experience enriches the program and demonstrates to our clients there is a great cross-section of society interested in their success.

Have you evaluated the effectiveness of the program?

No. Primarily because of a lack of funding, we've been unable to evaluate our effectiveness. We have additional challenges, too. What measures effectiveness? Is it merely recidivism or can it be enhancing a prisoner's experience while behind bars and encouraging him to engage with his community and seek assistance after he's released? Studies have shown reentry advising alone is not an effective means of reducing recidivism. However, at San Quentin, most of our participants also engage in other programs, such as GED preparation, college classes, restorative justice, social justice, yoga, religious programming, literacy and leadership programs. In a perfect world, we would study how the totality of programming - including the California Reentry Program - affects prison violence, positive parole board hearings, self-esteem, and perhaps recidivism, too.



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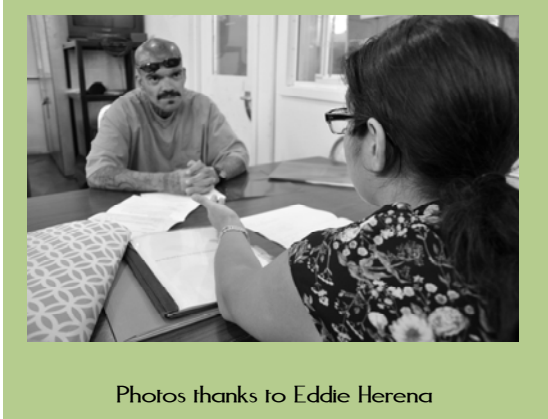
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What is your vision for the future?

My dream is and always has been to provide more depth of services to our clients at San Quentin. After that, I would love to expand to other prisons. But, in order to accomplish either of these dreams, we need increased and stable funding.

If you have more questions, please contact us! ♦



CRP's Work

In the past five years we have...

- ♦ Seen an average of 300 new clients per year
- ♦ Provided parole clothing to average 80 clients per year
- ♦ Brought in over 130 community volunteers to work with clients

Thank you for your support!

California Reentry Program
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