

Concord Prison Outreach

CPO

Spring Newsletter 2013

*Helping Prepare Today's Inmates To Be
Tomorrow's Good Neighbors*



Reducing Recidivism Through Education and Training

Veronica Madden, Director of Inmate Training and Education at the Massachusetts Department of Correction, blended vision, facts, practicality, and a human touch at her February 2013 presentation to CPO members. She painted a portrait of inmates with 50% having no diploma/GED at commitment, 25% being mentally ill, and likely more than 30% having learning disabilities. These educational and mental health challenges are coupled with little prior work experience and a strong likelihood of substance abuse/addiction.

Evidence-based research from 2006 showed that receiving a GED in prison reduced recidivism in Massachusetts by 17%. In 2012, 63% of the 372 inmates taking the GED passed. Along with focusing on the GED, Madden's department oversees educational and vocational programs serving nearly 2000 inmates on any given day. The demand for programming is strong; in 2012, nearly 1500 inmates were waitlisted for academic programs and more than 3000 inmates were waitlisted for vocational education.

Madden highlighted the importance of post-secondary education, citing statistical studies and political initiatives to expand community college degrees. She has formed a steering committee to develop a strategic plan to develop resources for technology, curriculum development, staffing, and inmate college and career readiness.

CPO's partnership with the Department of Correction was hailed as "unique" by Madden, with CPO's numerous vocational and educational programs. Staffed by volunteers, offerings include the acclaimed horticulture program, tutoring, entrepreneurial skills, and a new Math Prep class.

With its strong roster of active and retired teachers, CPO augments the programming provided by Madden's department. CPO actively addresses inmates' need for marketable skills and adds programs on an ongoing basis. CPO's partnership with the DOC, strengthened through relationships such as meeting with Veronica Madden and ongoing Dialogue meetings, is a cornerstone of CPO's mission.

- Lisa Daigle



The Rewards of Volunteering

I firmly believe that one of the greatest "gifts" parents can give their children is an education. Education introduces children to a thrilling world of learning, a world of new and ongoing opportunity and, ultimately, the ability to support oneself. I've come to appreciate that "gift" even more during the past 18 months that I've tutored Adult Basic Education (ABE) at the Northeastern Correctional Center.

Each week for the past year and a half, I've tutored three ABE classes at the NECC. My classes are part of the GED program at NECC, however, I work with men who are not yet qualified to begin pre-GED or GED studies. Who are they? They are men who read and write at less than a high school level, men who oftentimes read at a fifth grade level or lower. Some barely read at all. They are primarily young - between the ages of 20 and 40 - although I have several "older" students. They've dropped out of school as early as the fifth grade for a variety of reasons: chaotic home life, frequent relocation, drugs/alcohol, incarceration . . . or a combination of all these factors.

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It moves me to see how the lack of education has affected my students. Initially, they may be embarrassed about their poor reading/writing skills. They tell me they “forgot” how to write an essay. Or, they are extremely reluctant to read out loud in class. When they discover they’re not the only ones who need improvement, they become less self-conscious and start to enjoy class. Sadly enough, there are those who feel they can’t learn or that it’s too late to learn. Imagine not being able to read a newspaper, labels on products you buy, even letters from family members.

Lack of education accounts for why many of my students are unable to provide adequately for themselves and their families. Minimum wage jobs cannot support a family, and so many have turned to illegal activities to generate income. Unfortunately, those activities are the first step down the road to incarceration. When these men are released from prison and they reintegrate into society, their chances of success are significantly diminished if they don’t have a high school diploma. And so, the poverty-crime cycle continues.

The way I teach depends on the group of students I have in a particular class. Sometimes, I start with something as simple as basic phonics. Many of the men never learned that each letter of the alphabet or combination of letters “makes” a sound. It’s difficult to read or write without this understanding. We read (aloud) simple articles about world events. Since world news is a lot less accessible if you can’t read ordinary newspapers or a computer, the men appreciate reading about events in a simplified news publication called “News for You.” Writing seems to be the most daunting of tasks. We spend tons of time doing it. Over the course of the academic year, they learn to write a sentence, then to write a paragraph, and, finally, to write an essay. I use a variety of fun writing exercises and we practice, practice, practice. They learn, and they enjoy learning. They gain confidence and a sense of accomplishment.

Each year, a couple of my ABE students will move into the pre-GED classes. They are one step closer to being eligible to sit for the GED exam. They have the opportunity to receive the much-delayed “gift” of an education. I’m so humbled and appreciative to be a part of the CPO’s volunteer program at NECC.

- Pam Pierson

Transforming Anger Through Nonviolent Communication

All emotions including dissatisfying ones like anger, fear and sadness are messages that point to what is important to us. “Transforming Anger with Nonviolent Communication” helps inmates learn to translate their emotions into an understanding of basic human needs. Once they have identified these needs they can make life-giving choices that were not evident in the past, thus breaking the reactive patterns of the past and enabling them to make better decisions in their lives.

“Transforming Anger with Nonviolent Communication” is a new offering at the Northeastern Correctional Center, where we have recently begun the second 12 week series. This program is unique in its approach to dealing with anger. Inmates learn both concrete skills to communicate effectively and get the opportunity to change long-held beliefs about anger and self responsibility. Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD, the creator of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), designed a process for both speaking and listening that helps one to have more satisfaction in life through creating connection. Inmates practice transparent communication and learn the value of self connection and connection to others. They get the challenge of learning to value the needs of others as well as their own.

It is my hope that the inmates will use these new skills not only to deal with anger but that these same skills will help them to be safe and productive in their lives.

Our dream is to grow this program so we can reach all who would benefit from it. We hope to bring it to both MCI Concord and Billerica House of Correction. A study was conducted in Washington state on the effectiveness of NVC. They discovered that inmates who participated in training over a two-year period had a lower recidivism rate. From my own experience, I noticed a transition from the new skills being a cognitive effort to being innately natural. This does take more than a 12 week program. We are working to build a pool of volunteers interested in mastering the teaching of NVC. If you are interested in exploring this program please contact Concord Prison Outreach.

- Dave Smith



Message from Carol Peters

"Our lives are unique stones in the mosaic of human existence - priceless and irreplaceable."

- Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*

This quotation is one of my favorites as it captures the spirit of Concord Prison Outreach. We volunteers bring this respect to every person in our work behind the walls. We believe in the unique and precious value of all, and we strive to help the incarcerated develop to their potential. We know that when we all thrive, we all win.

Our work continues with new efforts in education and job skills. This year, we started two education programs for men who have completed the GED (high-school equivalency) providing the opportunity to continue improving their math and communication skills. We are also working to introduce a new program called "Parenting from the Inside" to strengthen the parenting skills of the men behind the wall.

We have recently expanded our outreach to the Billerica House of Correction offering a literature class on short stories and a writing class. We hope this will be just the beginning of our efforts to reach more of the incarcerated in Massachusetts.

We thank you all for your support. You make this work possible. It wouldn't happen without you.

- Carol Peters, Executive Director

Math Education

Concord Prison Outreach has started a new course this spring: a high school math review and test preparation course. Research has shown that enabling inmates to pursue higher education helps to reduce recidivism rates. By offering this course, CPO is trying to do just that: make it possible for these men to go to college upon release, and, hopefully as a consequence, remain out of prison.

An interesting challenge that we've encountered teaching the course has been the varying level of experience of the students. We have some students who have never seen a variable before and others who have taken college-level math courses. Reviewing the material at a level that is accessible to those for whom the material is new, yet also interesting for those who have a strong grasp on the material, has been a challenging but rewarding exercise. One way we've handled it is to request that the more advanced students help the students who are struggling during our break out sessions. This not only increases the level of attention and help that the struggling students receive, but also reinforces the concepts for the more advanced students.

So far, the course has been successful. The men are engaged and actively participating, and it is clear that their math skills are improving. It is sometimes hard to see how math affects your day-to-day life, but math is everywhere: when you measure ingredients to cook, budget for your

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monthly spending, or finally get around to putting up those shelves in the closet, you are using math. Even if these men don't end up going to college, they will be better equipped to handle the everyday math challenges that life outside will bring.

- Lizzie DeYoung

Special thanks to Middlesex Savings Bank
for supporting the printing and mailing
of this newsletter.

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Special Thanks to Theodore Ford Webb for helping with
the layout of this newsletter. www.fordwebbdesigns.com

Where Do Your Donations Go?

Here are some of the things you helped support last year:

- 414 inmates took part in Alternative to Violence workshops, along with 20 volunteers, in both prisons learning communication and conflict-resolution skills.
- 327 men learned computer skills, prepared for the GED exam, or worked on reading and math skills, aided by 14 CPO tutors at NECC and MCI Concord.
- 180 children enjoyed making holiday projects with their inmate fathers at NECC, and each chose a book to take home from the many donated by people in the community.
- 212 inmates learned to understand their emotions and how to direct them in BEACON emotional literacy classes.
- 100 men from both prisons explored better ways to discipline and communicate with their children in Fathers' Groups.
- 22 men read aloud a children's book on video to be sent home to their child--a way to be "present" although far away.
- 65 men had the opportunity to read and discuss works of literature and spiritual healing in small book groups.
- 75 men worked on Job Search Skills, self awareness, and Music Theory, among other programs, at NECC.
- 60 men created cards and other artwork in the art program at NECC.
- 30 men learned Horticultural skills, planted and maintained gardens, both flower and vegetable, in both prisons.
- and 1670 men, every inmate in both prisons, received a gift bag personally given to him by a CPO volunteer.

Concord Prison Outreach, Inc.

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