A full house of nearly 100 people turned out for a talk and Q&A by Commissioner Luis S. Spencer of the Department of Correction (DOC) on April 3, 2012, organized by Concord Prison Outreach and hosted at Trinitarian Congregational Church in Concord. Volunteers, community members, state legislators, and numerous staff from the DOC listened to Commissioner Spencer’s vision and priorities. Drawing on the legacy of John F. Kennedy, Commissioner Spencer quoted, “Those who look only to the past or present are sure to miss the future.” The Commissioner then looked ahead to the key role of volunteers in his vision, acknowledging CPO’s mission.

The DOC’s strategic plan emphasizes the need for programs to reduce recidivism along with cost-saving measures such as reducing energy usage through wind turbines and solar panels. Compelling statistics included the $45-47,000 annual cost to incarcerate one person, the cost savings that could result from cutting recidivism by 10-15%, the eventual release of 92% of inmates, the fact that 75% of inmates will be returned to society in the next five years, and the 70+% rate of substance abuse and/or mental health disorders in the prison population. He acknowledged the need for more programming and initiatives so that inmates will be returned to society as better citizens.

Commissioner Spencer conveyed that his leadership style is focused on quantifiable results; he lauded the 70% pass rate for the GED, with Massachusetts’ prisons scoring amongst the highest in the nation. He outlined a seven-point plan to increase evidence-based programming by volunteers.

The heart of Commissioner Spencer’s talk focused on the importance of volunteers. Statewide, some 1500 volunteers delivered 151,000 hours of programs in 2010. With the need for more job training and educational programs, coupled with the state’s difficult fiscal climate, volunteers will play an increasingly important role in programs that reduce recidivism. Along with the many practical skills offered by volunteers, Commissioner Spencer sees volunteers as offering compassion and humanity, serving as role models, and providing a realistic presence to inmates.

During the audience Q&A, Commissioner Spencer said he intends to increase volunteerism through investing more time in volunteer relationships. He cited the bimonthly Dialogue Group and community forums as examples, and he is committed to improving communication at all levels at the DOC.

--Lisa Daigle

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead

On left: AVP volunteers Laughing Linsey and Caring Carolyn lead a three-day AVP workshop behind the wall at MCI-Concord. See article on Page 3.
Bob Cunningham Honored by DOC

Long-time prison volunteer Bob Cunningham has been honored with the “Beyond Excellence” award from the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC). The award was in the category “Professional Excellence - Volunteer.” Bob’s achievements were highlighted by DOC Commissioner Luis S. Spencer at the department’s annual Beyond Excellence Awards Ceremony held in late 2011.

Bob has been active in Concord Prison Outreach for many years, both as a volunteer and as member of the Board of Directors. Recently he completed three years as Chairman of the Board, and he continues as a member of the Steering Committee.

Mr. Cunningham has been active in a number of volunteer programs at MCI-Concord and Northeastern Correctional Center, including Alternatives to Violence workshops and running a weekly fathers’ support group. In December, when Santa Claus comes to see the children in the prison visiting room, sometimes Santa has a certain resemblance to Bob.

Mr. Cunningham was also recognized for his volunteer services for inmates who are Roman Catholic. In nominating him for the award, Deputy Superintendent Karen DiNardo wrote, “Over the past year the facility has been without a Catholic Chaplain. Bob went above and beyond the call of volunteerism and single handedly recruited Jesuit priests to celebrate Catholic Mass at MCI-Concord for the past year. Bob also facilitated a Confirmation class and prepared a group of men to be confirmed into their Catholic faith. Bob also coordinated the visit of Cardinal Sean O’Malley to serve as the celebrant of the Confirmation Mass. His dedication to his volunteerism and faith are unwavering.”

Deputy Superintendent DiNardo also wrote that Bob is “a forward thinker” and that he “has offered many suggestions and thoughtful insight into offender programming.” She added that he has been a great asset to MCI-Concord.

Concord Prison Outreach salutes Bob Cunningham for his Beyond Excellence Award. We continuously see, up close, Bob’s commitment to the men behind the wall as they work to improve their lives in order to become productive citizens upon release. He is an inspiration to us as volunteers as well as to the inmates.

-- Don Miller

* * *

Who We Are:

Staff: Carol Peters, Executive Director • Win Wilbur, Administrative Assistant • Mark Richards, AVP Coordinator

Board of Directors: Michael Krupa, Chair • Karen Paradies and Carol Tierney, Co-Vice Chair • Richard Leaver, Treasurer • Lisa Daigle, Recording Sec’y • Karen Ippolito, Corresponding Sec’y • Jonathan Hoch • Holly Lapp • Jay Luby • Marsha Martin • Don Miller • Kai Shaner

Steering Committee: Sibylle Barlow • Paul Byrd • Mark Collett • Robert Cunningham • Lisa duBois • Beverly Duncan • Larry Frey • Toby Frost • Lynn Holbein • Jean Goulde • Lenore James • Stephen Kirk • Channing Migner • Bruce Nickerson • Jiffy Read • Linda Reynolds • Kathy Rubenstein • Marty Ryan • Susan Schwartz • Nancy Shippen • Jane Simons • Jini Vockel • Chris Upton

Supporting Faith Groups: Acton Congregational, Acton • Acton Friends Meeting, Concord • Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Belmont • Church of the Good Shepherd, Episcopal, Acton • Congregation Or Atid, Jewish, Wayland • First Church of Christ, Scientist, Concord • First Parish, UU, Bedford • First Parish, UU, Cambridge • First Parish, UU, Concord • First Parish, UU and UCC, Lincoln • First Parish, UU, Stow and Acton • First Parish, UU, Sudbury • First Religious Society, UU, Carlisle • First Unitarian Society, UU, Newton • Framingham Friends Meeting • Friends Meeting at Cambridge • Hancock UCC, Lexington • Holy Family, Catholic, Concord • Kerem Shalom, Jewish, Concord • Leominster Assembly of God • Maynard United Methodist, Maynard • Open Door Baptist, Belmont • Parish of the Epiphany, Episcopal, Winchester • St. Anne’s-in-the-Fields, Episcopal, Lincoln • St. Catherine of Alexandria, Catholic, Westford • St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal, Wilmington • St. Elizabeth of Hungary Catholic, Acton • St. Irene Catholic, Carlisle • St. John Evangelical Lutheran, Sudbury • St. Matthew’s United Methodist, Acton • St. Michael Parish, Catholic, Hudson • St. Peter’s Episcopal, Weston • St. Paul’s Episcopal, Brookline • Sudbury United Methodist, Sudbury • Trinitarian Congregational, Concord • Trinity Episcopal, Concord • United Church of Christ Congregational, Boxborough • West Concord Union, Concord
Reflections of a Prison Volunteer

There is so much joy in discovering human commonality with people with whom, at face value, I have little in common. This is one reason I keep coming back to my work in the prisons. I find the hours spent volunteering in prison both energizing and exhausting – uplifting, and sometimes, discouraging.

How many times in the last twenty or so years have I driven to prison to embark upon a 3-day Alternatives to Violence (AVP) workshop? I haven’t kept count. Yet, I am as excited and as full of anticipation now as I was the first time I joined a workshop. By the time the program begins, I have already met with my team of inside and outside facilitators and we have planned a tentative schedule. But experience has shown me that I can never predict just what is going to transpire over the next three days.

Generally, in an AVP workshop, two dozen or so of us gather in a clean, empty and rather drab classroom. Who would guess that the room will soon be vibrant with conversation, laughter and, sometimes, tears? Before we begin, the circle of men sit quietly, eyes downcast, looking glum, probably wondering what these sixteen or seventeen hours that they’ve committed to over the next three days will bring.

As I see it, the main purpose of all three of the AVP workshop levels is to search for the best in ourselves and others, to practice communication skills, to work at cooperating within a group framework, and to affirm ourselves and one another, to work with what is positive in our lives, and to try to rectify or at least improve the negative parts. We approach these goals through various channels, including one-on-one conversations, group discussions, role plays, and games.

And, of course, using recidivism as a metric suggests that the only beneficiaries are the inmates. What of the benefits to the outside participants? Almost always, one or two local members of neighboring communities have heard about AVP and want to experience for themselves what the program offers. The inmates show enormous appreciation for outsiders coming into prison to form community with them. More often than not, these outside folks find themselves “hooked” and go through training to become AVP facilitators themselves.

I’ve known participants to begin a workshop with a lethargic or negative attitude (“I just want to take AVP for the certificate”) and end up saying, “I want to be a facilitator and hope that I can bring a program like this one to my community when I’m released.” Pretty heady stuff! Will they falter in their resolve along the way? Yes, it’s likely. Don’t we all?

As for myself, I deem the program a success. It is uplifting to recognize that I and all of us, from whatever path in life we travel, can come together for three days and connect with understanding and compassion.

-- Carolyn Shohet

Message from Carol Peters

This spring, at the volunteer orientation at MCI-Concord, 15 talented and generous new volunteers geared up to serve in many of our programs. The group included leaders for our new mindfulness meditation program, AVP and BEACON volunteers, horticulturists, volunteers to work with children in Kid’s Corner, and experts in business and computers, all ready to reach out and teach inmates skills to prepare them to find jobs and build better lives. This is what CPO does: we bring volunteers through the doors, and help them find ways of serving those who need so much.

The most rewarding aspect of Concord Prison Outreach is being part of a team that is committed to building a better world through love and compassion. What a wonderful way to manifest our lives: in service to those who need so much and have access to so little. What a joyful way to live: sharing our time and effort with others of similar intent.

We can change the world one person at a time, one program at a time – the inevitable and unstoppable power of caring. Please join us.

-- Carol Peters, Executive Director
The generous contributions of our supporting faith groups and members of the community are essential to meet our part-time staff and program expenses. Our volunteers depend on your support to provide the program materials and services that are so beneficial to our incarcerated neighbors. We appreciate whatever amount you can give and are grateful for your support. Many employers have programs in place to match donations made by their employees. We are a 501(c)(3) non-religious charity. An envelope for your tax-deductible contribution is enclosed.

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

Puppies in Prison

There are some new faces at MCI-Concord. This spring, NEADS/Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans placed four puppies at MCI-Concord. Inmates care for the dogs, help with their socialization, and prepare them for assisting deaf and disabled people. Everyone wins in these programs: the dogs receive lots of guidance and attention; the inmates have animals to nurture; and people grappling with disabilities or loss of mobility benefit from the assistance of these well-trained dogs. The NEADS program has been training dogs at NECC for many years.

Both these programs need volunteers for tasks outside the prison, such as transporting dogs to the veterinarian, or providing weekend foster homes for the puppies to expand the dog’s experiences. For more information, visit the NEADS web site at www.neads.org or call 978-422-9064.

Special thanks to Theodore Ford Webb of Ford Webb Design for helping with the layout of this newsletter.