Interview with Executive Director

Kaia Stern

Reverend Dr. Kaia Stern officially began serving as Executive Director of Concord Prison Outreach at the beginning of July. She quickly immersed herself into the rigors of working with new administrations at both MCI-Concord and Northeastern Correctional Center, as well as with the newly elected CPO Board of Directors. I recently had the opportunity to sit with Kaia and ask her some questions. I hope after reading her responses you will agree that CPO has been blessed with a very capable and talented leader and that you will join me in welcoming Kaia and offering her our ongoing support in realizing CPO’s goals.

Lanny Kutakoff, Vice Chair, CPO

What was it about CPO that most attracted you to the organization and to wanting to be the Executive Director?

Concord Prison Outreach values meaningful human connection and that is compelling to me. For nearly 50 years, CPO has been engaged in service that is focused on helping people in prison create more fulfilling lives for themselves and their families. Building bridges between faith communities and people confined to prison is rare and much needed work. When I learned about CPO and met some of the people who are (as Alice Walker writes) the “human sunrises” who make the organization work, I knew it would be an honor to be chosen as the Executive Director.

What are some of the more immediate things you expect to concentrate on in an effort to further advance the mission of CPO?

I am focused on supporting programmatic needs in the two Concord prisons. It recently came to my attention that hundreds of men who are incarcerated at MCI-Concord and Northeastern Correctional Center have been on waiting lists to participate in basic literacy programs. To address this, the Division of Inmate Training and Education recently reallocated resources, established minimum standards and redesigned curriculum with the specific goal of reducing wait lists and increasing the number of participants that successfully obtain a High School Equivalency.

In alignment with these goals, Concord Prison Outreach is dedicated to meeting the demand for tutors to help men pass the HiSET exam (the new high school equivalency test that has replaced the GED in the Commonwealth). Another immediate focus is to develop, nurture, and strengthen CPO’s relationships with volunteers and surrounding faith communities.

What do you anticipate your greatest challenge/s will be?

Thus far, my challenge is to balance the time I actually have to devote to Concord Prison Outreach (which is a part-time position), and my desire to be of service, to do more, to connect more and to learn more. There are so many people I have been in touch with through email and phone conversations—volunteers who offer their time and attention to Concord Prison Outreach and staff in the Department of Correction who make our work possible—who I would be grateful to meet in person, to hear their stories, to learn about their work. So I guess the greatest challenge that I anticipate is linear time.

You’re such a multi-faceted person—an educator, a minister, an author, an advocate for human rights and criminal justice reform, and now the Executive Director of CPO—what is it that’s most central to who you are professionally and personally?

To be honest, none of those identities—educator, minister, author, advocate—is most central to who I am. Rather, I imagine myself and feel myself to be a disciple, mother, sister, daughter, and friend. But when I am still, when faith in what I cannot name is guiding me, most central is feeling blessed.

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HiSET - High School Equivalency Program

You can make a big difference in someone’s life by helping the men at MCI-Concord and NECC prepare for their high school equivalency examinations. See the message from Kaia Stern on page 2 and consider volunteering in this exciting program!
Interview with Kaia Stern (continued)

What motivated you to write your book Voices from American Prisons: Faith, education, and healing, and what do you think is the most important thing the reader can learn from it?

When I first stepped into a maximum-security prison in New York in 1993, the sunlight refracted off of the steel around a man’s ankles and temporarily blinded me. My life was altered. That’s when I began to write Voices from American Prisons: Faith, education, and healing. Writing is medicine for me. The motivation is about bearing witness. Reckoning with painful truths and stories that inspire, bearing witness to healing, transformation, and justice.

What do I think is the most important thing the reader can learn? Thank you for this question.

We are all connected. The one in shackles is our kin. The one in the officer’s uniform is our kin. Resist the tyranny of relational amnesia.

What has been most rewarding for you about the work you’ve done in prisons?

Humanity asserts itself again and again and again. I have been blessed to be part of prison classrooms for the last 22 years in various states and the opportunity to collaborate with the people who I meet in this work is the most rewarding.

How do you think CPO can best serve the men we work with inside, and what words of advice and encouragement can you offer both prospective and current volunteers?

Serve them by showing up, bringing your whole selves, your kindness and integrity. As words of advice, I invoke Mahatma Gandhi… “Be the change you wish to see in the world”. For encouragement to volunteers, I offer the following: We are grateful. Your work is meaningful beyond measure. Your presence is part of the leaven that transforms people’s lives. And you are not alone. It can be harrowing to move through carceral spaces and witness suffering. You are doing the work of love warriors. Concord Prison Outreach is eternally grateful for your time and generosity of spirit.

“...in light of the egregious cost of crime and incarceration and the profound negative impact it has on humankind, the common sense approach of education and uplifting the prison population should be single-mindedly pursued.”

Erin Gaffney, Deputy Superintendent of Classification and Treatment, MCI-Concord

CPO and New Directions for Prison Education

A Message from Kaia Stern

Each in his turn. Each one taught one, you see—and it goes that way. Education is, I think, possibly, the germ of salvation.

—Edward “Doc” Dowdy

Studies conducted over the last three decades indicate that educational programs in prison translate into reductions in crime, savings to taxpayers, and long-term contributions to the safety and well-being of the communities to which formerly incarcerated people return. It is no surprise that a high correlation exists between the level of education attained by someone who is incarcerated and his or her recidivism rate. The American Correctional Association has reported that in Indiana the recidivism rate for people who have obtained their high school equivalency diploma is 20% lower than the general prison population’s rate, and the recidivism rate for college degree completers is 44% lower than the general population’s.

In other words, the higher the degree earned, the lower the recidivism rate.

The vast majority of people in U.S. prisons do not have a high school diploma. Specifically, hundreds of men imprisoned at MCI-Concord are in need of tutors to help them pass the HiSET exam, which is the new equivalent of the GED, or basic high school equivalency test that is being used throughout the Commonwealth. Thankfully, Concord Prison Outreach is allied with the Massachusetts Department of Correction to meet this basic demand for literacy among people in prison. I am deeply grateful for our collaboration. Lois Russo, Superintendent at MCI-Concord, is clear that expanding the amount of educational programs is a top priority. In her words, “The inmate population has diverse educational needs and we do not have the programming available to meet all of those needs in a timely manner. As such, the possibility of partnering with CPO in this endeavor is very exciting.”

Erin Gaffney, the Deputy Superintendent of Classification and Treatment at MCI-Concord, is also clearly committed to our efforts. In her words, “Education is the primary gateway to solve a myriad of problems confronting society. Putting inmates back into the community without providing the tools and knowledge to help them become productive and successful citizens is unfair and tragic. We can do better.” Yes, we can. Indeed, we are. Concord Prison Outreach is gearing up to staff programs to tutor reading comprehension and expository writing, as well as math (particularly algebra) at the two local prisons, MCI-Concord and Northeastern Correctional Center.

Consider, for a moment, the children in your life. Perhaps you are even blessed with grandchildren. Now keep in mind the significant number of children affected by their parents’ incarceration: in the first decade of the 21st century, more than half of all people behind bars had minor children at the time of their imprisonment. Most incarcerated parents had lived with their children prior to imprisonment and expected to be reunited with them upon release. When children are inspired by their parents to take education more seriously—to learn to read and write and then graduate from high school—they too begin to see viable alternatives to shunning formal education.
**CPO and New Directions for Prison Education (continued)**

and participating in crime, thus breaking a harrowing cycle of intergenerational incarceration.

Imagine the shame of not being able to write your child a letter, your beloved child who falls asleep every night missing you because you are not present. Archbishop Oscar Romero reminds us to “plant seeds that one day will grow, to water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise”. Education in prison is like leaven for seven generations yet to be born, and we wholeheartedly welcome your participation. Thank you for your consideration and steadfast support.

Most sincerely, Kaia


**Words Matter**

During a Transforming Anger with Nonviolent Communication class at MCI-Concord, I partnered with a young man as we each struggled to articulate early influences that shaped our lives. The recollections were hard to grapple with---for both of us. We shared with each other some of the pain of growing up in very flawed families. By the time we finished the exercise, it was clear that both of us were moved by the other’s story, and that surprisingly, we both found a lot to relate to in each other.

When sharing gratitude at the end of the class, I remarked that, thanks to my discussion with this young man, I discovered that people from every walk of life have much more in common than we imagine. I left that class changed by this realization.

I thought of this experience recently when the CPO Board met with Kaia Stern and discussed the importance of language when talking about the work we do. Inspired by the teachings of the late Eddie Ellis (former Director, Riverside Church Metro Prison Ministry), I came to appreciate that words have a big impact in creating connection or distance between people.

In an open letter, Ellis noted that common words used to describe people formerly or currently incarcerated include “inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons … all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people.”

Although I’ve often used those words, thinking them merely descriptive, I understand now that our language can be humanizing or dehumanizing, and that all of those words are examples of the latter. In the spirit of finding our common humanity, I’ve resolved to use language that reflects my heart. The men we at CPO work with are people: people incarcerated, people in prison, people with criminal convictions---but first and foremost---PEOPLE.

In Ellis’s own words, “if we can get … organizations and individuals like you to refrain from using the old … language and simply refer to us as “people,” we will have achieved a significant step forward in our life giving struggle to be recognized as the human beings we are.”

I invite you to join us in bringing this vision to light.

Debbie Dormitzer, CPO volunteer and Board Member

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**Who We Are**

**Staff:** Kaia Stern, Executive Director • Holly Lapp, Administrative Assistant and Interim Outreach Coordinator  
**Board of Directors:** Karen Baratta, Chair • Lanny Kutakoff, Vice Chair • Richard Leaver, Treasurer • Phyllis Wentworth, Recording Secretary • Debbie Dormitzer • Mark Fingerle • Alice Kaufman • Jay Luby • Don Miller • John Pallies • Jacquie Young  
**Steering Committee:** Betty Case • Paul Caswell • Mark Collett • Robert Cunningham • Raju Datla • Carol DeLaney • Jeannie Dorismond • Beverly Duncan • Ben Goldhaber • Jean Goulden • Larry Green • Jonathan Hoch • Lynn Holbein • Stephen Kirk • Michael Krupa • Marsha Martin • Francine Mc Grath • June McKnight • Ken Meltz • Bruce Nickerson • Karen Paradise • Linda Reynolds • Marty Ryan • Gary Schapiro • Nancy Shippen • Anne Waters • Dorothy Weitzman • Win Wilbur • Julia Woodward

**With Gratitude to our Supporting Faith Groups:** Acton Congregational, Acton • Acton Monthly Meeting, Quaker, Concord • Carlisle Congregational, Carlisle • Church of the Good Shepherd, Episcopal, Acton • Concord Baha’i Community, Concord • Congregational Church, UCC, of Littleton • Congregational Church, UCC, of Weston • First Church of Malden Congregational • Faith Community, Hopkinton • First Parish, UU, in Bedford • First Parish, UU, Chelmsford • First Parish, UU, in Concord • First Parish, UU, in Lexington • First Parish, UU/CC, in Lincoln • First Parish, UU, of Stow and Acton • First Parish, UU, of Sudbury • First Religious Society, UU, in Carlisle • First Unitarian Society, UU, in Newton • Framingham Friends Meeting, Quaker, Framingham • Friends Meeting, Quaker, at Cambridge • Grace Baptist, Hudson • Grace Chapel, Lexington • Hancock UCC, Congregational, Lexington • Harvard, UU, Harvard • Holy Family Parish, Catholic, Concord • Kerem Shalom, Jewish, Concord • Newton Highlands Congregational, UCC, Newton • Park Avenue Congregational, UCC, Arlington • Second Church, UCC, in Newton • St. Anne Parish, Catholic, Littleton • St. Anne’s-in-the-Fields Episcopal, Lincoln • St. Bridget Parish, Catholic, Maynard • St. Catherine of Alexandria, Catholic, Westford • St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish, Catholic, Acton • St. Irene, Catholic, Carlisle • St. John Evangelical Lutheran, Sudbury • St. Matthew’s United Methodist, Acton • St. Paul’s Episcopal, Brookline • St. Peter’s Episcopal, Cambridge • South Acton Congregational, UCC, Acton • Sudbury United Methodist, Sudbury • Trinitarian Congregational, Concord • Trinity, Episcopal, Boston • Trinity Episcopal, Concord • United Church of Christ, Congregational, Boxborough • United Methodist, Newton • United Parish, UCC/Methodist/Baptist, in Brookline• West Concord Union, UCC, Concord

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Concord Prison Outreach  
PO Box 383, Concord, MA 01742  
CPO@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org  
www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org  
978-369-1430
Request for Help:

Holiday Gift Bag Project and Holiday Card Making

Each year, before Christmas, CPO assembles and distributes gift bags containing toiletry items, stationery, socks, and a holiday card for each man in the Northeastern Correctional Center and MCI-Concord. More than 1700 holiday cards are handmade by caring members of the community!

Please help us prepare these gift bags.

See the Newsletter Insert for details or visit: www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org

Carolining Night at NECC

Celebrate the joy of the holiday season at this annual event where incarcerated men, adult community members, and prison staff gather together.

Friday, December 4, 2015
6:45 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Please register in advance by November 27th:
Email your full legal name, driver's license/state issued ID #, date of birth, and phone number to: Events@ConcordPrisonOutreach.org, or call 617-286-6728.

A Message of Gratitude from Kaia Stern

Since joining Concord Prison Outreach as Executive Director in July, I have been blessed to meet many dedicated people—CPO volunteers and members of faith communities—all committed to improving the lives of incarcerated people. We are united by our passionate belief that our efforts can uplift our neighbors in prison and that, in so doing, we can create a better world not just for them but for us all.

In that spirit, I'd like to extend my sincere thanks to the extended CPO family of volunteers, faith communities and other donors for their dedication and support. You've made a big difference for so many. And of course, none of this would be possible without the efforts of Department of Correction administrators and staff at MCI-Concord and Northeastern Correctional Center, administrators and staff at Middlesex House of Correction, and Director of Volunteer Services, Bill Milhomme. Many thanks for their dedication to the populations they serve and their support of CPO programming.

I would also like to extend my personal thanks to Carol Peters, the former Executive Director of CPO, for the years of hard work and commitment that she put into this organization. Through supporting new and innovative programming, inspiring and growing the volunteer base, and working tirelessly to benefit those behind the walls, she has helped grow CPO into the robust, compassionate community it is today.

---With appreciation to the CPO newsletter team: The Dormitzer family and Holly Lapp---
Thank you for supporting our volunteer-led programs. Your donations help to pay for books and teaching materials that support our volunteers. Please consider supporting us so we can continue and grow CPO programs. Because we are a volunteer organization, your donations go a long way toward providing these services.

Please return this section with your donation

Yes, I’d like to contribute $________ toward CPO’s mission of helping people in prison

Your name: ________________________________________________________________

Address: __________________________________________________________________

City, State, Zip: __________________________________________________________________

Phone number (optional) _______________________________________________________

Email address (optional): ____________________________________________________

This donation is in memory/in honor of: __________________________________________

Please make your check payable to Concord Prison Outreach, and mail to:

PO Box 383, Concord, MA 01742

We appreciate your tax-deductible support. Concord Prison Outreach is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org
The 2015 Holiday Gift Bag Project

Again this year, CPO's Holiday Gift Bag Project will bring a bit of hope and holiday cheerfulness to each of the incarcerated men in Concord's two prisons. To help, here is what you need to know:

Each gift bag will contain the following items as approved by the Department of Correction. As always, please follow the specifications:

- 1 bar of deodorant soap, 4-5 oz.
- 1 tube toothpaste, 5.8 - 6 oz.
- 1 pad of WHITE paper 6” x 9” or 5” x 8”, 100 pages (no wire, please)
- 1 box white envelopes #6 3/4 (6 1/2” x 3 5/8”)
- 1 pair white CREW socks preferably 5 inches of ribbing or less (no tube socks, knee highs or “tennis socks”)
- 1 plastic bottle of shampoo - 12 -15 oz.
- 1 stick deodorant 2.5 oz. or larger (no roll-ons, NO GELS. please)
- A hand-made holiday greeting card with an uplifting message. Note that no type of glue or tape or stickers may be used. Please see www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org for more card-making instructions.

We welcome donations of the above items in any quantity. They do not need to be in sets. Many donors give multiple units of one item on the list. All donations are sorted, and each gift bag is assembled by volunteers. Cash donations are also welcome—they enable CPO to purchase items when necessary. Your tax-deductible check should be made out to “Concord Prison Outreach,” earmarked “Holiday Gifts,” and mailed to:

Concord Prison Outreach, Holiday Gift Bag Project, PO Box 383, Concord, MA 01742.

Adult volunteers are needed to sort the items and prepare the gift bags at Trinity Episcopal Church, weekday mornings Tuesday, Dec. 1st through Friday, Dec. 11th from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. In addition, there will be two evening sessions: Wednesday, Dec. 2nd and Tuesday, Dec. 8th from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. For the two evening sessions, CPO requests that volunteers sign up in advance by calling or emailing (see contacts below).

For information or to volunteer, please contact:
Carol Miller -- carolhmiller@comcast.net or 978-369-3755, or
Nancy Smith -- nancesmith@aol.com or 781-894-5526
For more information on this and other CPO programs, go to www.ConcordPrisonOutreach.org.

Remember: A holiday gift bag is kindness tied with a colorful ribbon. And think about this: most people in prison will be released eventually. Wouldn’t it be good for them to know that there are good-hearted people on the outside who think and care about them?