

# **Prisoners' Legal Services of New York**

## **Essentials of Life**

**A Newsletter  
Dedicated to  
Helping Women  
Face the  
Challenges of  
Prison Life**

Vol. 3, No. 6

December 2014

### **A Word from the Executive Director**

By Karen Murtagh, Esq., Executive Director



*Karen Murtagh,  
Executive Director*

As we embark upon the upcoming holiday season, there will be over 2 million people in prison in America. In New York, well over 81,000 people will spend the holiday season behind bars, either in a local jail or in a state prison. Families, friends and relatives of those who are incarcerated will also be impacted. In addition, thousands of correctional staff will be working in prisons and jails throughout the holiday season which will, in turn, affect their families, friends and relatives. When all is said and done, well over a million people in New York (5% of the State population) will be affected by jail or prison this holiday season.

Although many people find joy in celebrating the holiday season, for others the holidays can be a painfully depressing time. For some, the holidays bring on a feeling of melancholy, for others it is anxiety over finances, and still others suffer from clinical depression. For incarcerated people the holidays are often a heightened and painful reminder of being separated from their loved ones. These facts alone should make all of us sensitive to the emotional needs of the one million New Yorkers who will be experiencing the holidays through a prison lens.

Whether you are in prison and you are suffering, or you have a family member you are worried about, or you are outside of prison

and someone you love is incarcerated or working in a prison, it is important to take the time to listen, ask questions, and seek help when necessary. Learning how to identify and cope with the symptoms of holiday depression is an important step toward preventing or interrupting a downward spiral. Seeking out family and social support can often relieve holiday sadness. Seeking counseling or support groups can also help reduce feelings of loneliness. Knowing that there are other people who share similar feelings can help you understand and deal with your sadness. Finally, asking to speak to a mental health professional can be extremely helpful for people who are struggling with depression.

Whether you are a prisoner, a corrections officer, or have a family member or friend who lives or works in a prison, it is important to recognize symptoms of depression and seek, or assist others to seek, help.

As the holiday season approaches, take a moment to think about those in your life who have always been there for you. More importantly, think about those in your life who rely on you and need you in their lives. After all, no amount of presents can ever replace the greatest gift of all – love. May you find peace and joy in this holiday season. Happy Holidays!

*Karen*

<b>Inside This Issue</b>	
The Importance of Restorative Justice: Healing Communities and Preparing for Release . . . . .	2
Dear Annabelle . . . . .	5

# The Importance of Restorative Justice: Healing Communities and Preparing for Release

By Maureen Whitcomb, Secretary, Albany Office

## **What is Restorative Justice?**

Restorative Justice (RJ) is a term that has various definitions, some of which you may have heard before. On a basic level, RJ is an alternative to incarceration approach that seeks to bring together victims of crimes and those who have committed those crimes in order to bring about healing and accountability. RJ programs also look to broaden the definition of a “victim”. Most often we think of a victim of a crime as a person who has felt the direct effects of a crime. RJ looks at other victims such as family members who are negatively influenced by their loved ones committing crimes and going to jail or prison. It also looks at the communities in which crimes are committed and which are negatively affected by community members being incarcerated. As we know all too well, our current legal system focuses primarily on what we do with those who commit crimes rather than acknowledging the impact that crimes have on victims, communities, and how we can focus on repairing the harm of crime. Traditionally RJ consists of “encounter programs” between victims of crimes and those who have committed crimes. For example, a family would meet with teenagers who burglarized their home,

expressing their feelings and negotiating a plan for repairing the harm that was done. However, since the 1970s when RJ first emerged, it has reached far beyond encounter programs and has been implemented in schools, religious bodies, and in entire communities.

## **How is RJ Important to the Currently Incarcerated?**

You may be wondering, how is this important to me? I am already in prison. It is true that most RJ programs take place outside of prison. This is because, in terms of access and location, it is much easier for those who commit crimes to make amends if they are not in prison. Another reason is that RJ is most often community-based, meaning that RJ programs work with victims of crime and those who commit crimes in their community. This becomes difficult when someone is in prison because they are not living in their community and are often hundreds of miles away from their community. A final reason that RJ programs most often happen outside of prison is because they are seen as an alternative to incarceration. Advocates hope that RJ programs will be used as rehabilitation to keep people out of prison in the first place. Regardless of these reasons, there have been efforts to

explore RJ programs in prison. They are important because they help victims of crimes and those in prison for committing crimes to change thinking, come to terms with past events, and they better prepare people who are in prison for release back into their communities.

## **Restorative Justice in Prison: What Does It Look Like?**

There are RJ programs in prisons across the world and some have been implemented in specific states, such as Minnesota, in the U.S. There are several ways that RJ efforts have started in prison settings. One way is when prisoners decide that they would like to find ways to make amends and meet and learn about their victims. Sometimes, leaders in correctional services or individuals working on prison rehabilitation see the need and benefit of RJ programs and implement them. A final way is when individual victims of crimes decide they would like to meet with the person who committed the crime against them. One of the largest benefits of RJ programs for people while they are in prison is for successful reentry. RJ programs allow people who have committed crimes to better understand how what has happened influenced their family and friends, allowing for stronger relationships when returning from prison. It further

*(Continued on page 3, “TPR Hearings”)*

teaches individuals the overall impact of crime on communities as well as on victims of crimes, in hopes that crimes will not be committed again. RJ programs that often have the largest impact are those that focus on restoring community because it allows for an understanding and investment in community and teaches the importance of giving back. For example, in Stillwater Prison in Minnesota incarcerated individuals assembled meal packets as a part of the prison's Restorative Justice Offender Council. These meal packets were distributed to hungry children in the community.

### What Can I Do?

If you are interested in being a part of a RJ program while you are in prison, talk to your Inmate Liaison Committee (ILC) if you are able to see if there is such a program you are eligible for, or if it would be possible to start a program. If you would like to support RJ programs in the community, write to your elected officials about the benefits of these programs. Restorative Justice Programs both as an alternative to incarceration and as a way to make amends for those who are already in prison strengthens individuals, families, and communities and allows people to make better lives for themselves and others. If you would like to learn more about Restorative Justice, you can write to the Prisoners' Legal Services Albany Office, Attn: Maureen Whitcomb, Legal Secretary.

**The Capital Region Prison Letter Writing Group (CRPLWG)** is a grassroots group of community members who create friendships and intellectual and creative engagement with individuals in prison. Are you looking for a pen pal, but not a romantic relationship? Do you want someone to share your creative ideas or artwork with? Write a letter to the CRPLWG!

Capital Region Prison Letter Writing Group  
Albany Social Justice Center  
33 Central Avenue  
Albany, NY 12210



### **Dear Annabelle . . . A column to answer your questions**

This column will feature your questions about legal matters, reentry opportunities/programs and rehabilitation issues.

#### **Dear Annabelle:**

I love to express myself through art and writing. It helps me pass the time while I am inside. I would really like to share my work, though. Are there organizations that publish art and writings made by prisoners?

**Sincerely,**

**Art Without A Cause**

#### **Dear Without A Cause,**

Yes! There are plenty of organizations that call for artwork from prisoners across the country. Some hold contests that you can submit your work to and some look to publish work from prisoners.

Additionally, you can always send your stories, poems or artwork to PLS' Director of Pro Bono & Outreach, Samantha Howell, who is constantly seeking work to be included in the National Pro Bono Week Celebration in October.

Listed below are a few. I would encourage you to write to these organizations to find out

more information. I wish you luck with all your creative endeavors!

**Art Behind Bars, Inc.,** P.O. Box 2034, Key West, FL 33045-2034

**Pen Prison Writing Program,** 588 Broadway, Suite 303, New York, NY 10012

**Prisons Foundation,** P.O. Box 58043, Washington, D.C. 20037

**We want to hear from you!!!  
Please send your questions  
about legal matters, reentry  
opportunities and rehabilita-  
tion issues to Annabelle!!**



***Promoting justice,  
fair treatment and  
humane conditions since  
1976.***

This project was supported by a grant administered by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Division of Criminal Justice Services.

**We want to hear from you! To submit your story, poem, picture, send to the below address. PLS reserves the right to edit content to fit the publication.**

If you enjoyed reading this issue of *Essentials of Life* and would like to receive your own copies, free of charge, write to us and ask that we add you to our mailing list. You can write to us at:

Attention: EOL Staff  
Prisoners' Legal Services of New York  
41 State Street, Suite M112  
Albany, New York 12207

Please notify *EOL* each time you are transferred. DOCCS will not forward *EOL*.

***Essentials of Life Staff***  
***Editors: Karen L. Murtagh, Esq., Samantha Howell,***  
***Esq., Jennifer Cunha, Esq.***  
***Production and Copy Editing: Patti Kane***