

TiFA CONTACT



THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF TEXAS INMATE FAMILIES ASSOCIATION Vol. 21 No. 4 Oct 2016

TiFA Celebrates 20 Years!

Twenty years ago TIFA was founded as a result of a conversation between two brothers...one in the free world and the other in prison. Stuart and Sheldon DeLuca concluded that the one substantial part of the "criminal justice system" that had no representation, either within the system itself or in the larger political system, was the families of offenders. They decided to see if they could remedy the lack of representation by establishing the Texas Inmate Families Association, better known as TIFA. Now, twenty years later in 2016, TIFA will be celebrating its 20th anniversary.

In 1996, the director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) was approached about TIFA being a liaison between families and TDCJ. The first meeting with a TDCJ administrator, a few weeks after TIFA was formed, was with Gary Johnson and arranged by public information officer, Larry Todd, whom Stuart had known for years. He had no idea what kind of reception to expect, but was not at all prepared for Johnson's response: after Stuart told him about TIFA, his first words were, "This is great! This is exactly what we need!" Hours were spent discussing ways that TIFA could be helpful to TDCJ and vice versa. As a result, TIFA was granted permission to send literature about TIFA to the units and Johnson sent a letter to all 105 wardens, instructing them to allow TIFA members to place literature in visitation centers. Since then, TIFA has been instrumental in improving the communication between families and TDCJ.

TIFA maintains a cooperative working relationship with the TDCJ, and is respected by the Board of Criminal Justice and by the Board of Pardons and Paroles. TIFA works with TDCJ staff and families to identify and solve problems



concerning inmate health care, mistreatment, visitation, mail issues, grievance procedures, prison violence, mental health management, program placement, transfers, visitation, and parole.

But in a sense, TIFA's very name is somewhat misleading; we are concerned not only with the families of prison inmates, but with families of all persons convicted of serious crimes in Texas, whether they are under community supervision or parole, or attempting to re-enter society as productive, law-abiding citizens. The problems in the prison system have dominated our efforts partly because they are, in many cases, literally life and death issues, and partly because from the very beginning we have had the advantage of working with TDCJ's staff of dedicated professionals. We do not expect the problems of the prison system to disappear. Indeed, they may become more intractable if nonviolent offenders are diverted from the system and the prisons become filled with only the most incorrigible, violent offenders.

TIFA chapters provide a safe, secure environment for families to connect and share with those in similar circumstances. Connecting families during the incarceration of a loved one can provide critical information and support and mitigate feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Through our chapter meetings, website, newsletters, and Facebook page TIFA educates not only our family members but also others in the community about the issues around incarceration. Policies and

practices are constantly changing in the Texas prison system and families struggle to navigate the TDCJ bureaucracy.

TIFA also works to train family members to become effective advocates, empowering them to participate in and lead the legislative process. Consistent input from families in criminal justice reform debates enhances support for alternatives to incarceration, improved conditions of confinement, parole reform, and removing barriers to reentry.

Today the political climate is changing and our country is becoming aware of the need for criminal justice reform and beginning to respond to it. Legislative leaders are talking openly about the need to be "smart on crime," to rely on incarceration as a last resort for offenders who are too violent to be allowed back into the community. Evidence has accumulated that community-based treatment programs for offenders on probation or parole are more effective and vastly less expensive than long-term imprisonment.

Whatever progress we can claim has been at most a prelude; we have a long way to go, and there will always be families and friends with loved ones in Texas' criminal justice system who will need our support. TIFA must continue to work and grow and be a leader in order to bring attention to the affects that the criminal justice system has on our families and communities. Our work will never be done. **n**

RALLY! RALLY! RALLY!

**In February 2017 on the S. Steps of the Texas Capitol.
Check TIFA.org for more information and updates.**

TIFA Contact

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TIFA is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. Membership in TIFA is open to anyone. A Basic membership is \$25 per year and includes one newsletter subscription to the member address. A Basic Plus membership of \$35 per year includes all family members residing in one household and the inmate newsletter.

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And you can find us on Facebook.

Note: We read all mail that is received but cannot answer every letter. Our mission is strengthening families through support, education and advocacy.



From Board Chair Patti Kassel



Opportunities

Have you ever found an opportunity through your grief? Sometimes it very difficult to see that anything positive could come out of our grief. I recently lost my mom and my grief has been unbearable. The last time I felt this same type of grief was when my son was incarcerated. Can you relate? Yes, grief comes in so many forms and from so many sources. The grief experience as moms, dads, sisters, brothers or spouses when our loved ones are incarcerated is no different than what we might experience from a death. The grief process is the same. What I have uncovered through these experiences are the opportunities that sometimes lie in front of us. Many times, we come out of our grief changed either through our faith being strengthened or by the people we have met along the way. Sometimes we are drawn to organizations that support or rally for causes that mirror our grief. For this reason, many of us were brought to TIFA. It is an organization representing families grieving for their loved ones that have been incarcerated.

This year we celebrate our 20-year anniversary of supporting, educating and advocating for families of incarcerated loved ones. It is a great responsibility, but also an honor. Through our grief we find opportunities to help others. Here are just a few ways TIFA supports families:

- Local chapter meetings to discuss issues that affect you and your loved one
- Social media avenues to get support and ask questions
- Newsletters and constant contacts to keep you up to date on hot topics
- Education on how to advocate for your loved one in TDCJ, state and local levels
- Parole packet workshops
- Storybook program to allow children to hear their incarcerated parents read books to them
- and so much more... **n**

From the Executive Director Jennifer Erschabek



Sharing Our Stories!

Social justice leaders across the country increasingly recognize the power of narrative strategies to shape hearts and minds on the most critical issues of our time. Narrative strategies commonly refer to shaping the story told about social and political issues to mobilize public will for change. This is often done through the use of community organizing, research and publishing, educational tactics, and all strategies intended to persuade individuals or groups toward a new understanding of criminal justice issues.

TIFA works to shape the narrative by holding meetings, talking to the media, educating our neighbors and meeting with our Representatives and Senators all across the State.

Together we can bring about change but its only together that families will have a bigger voice. **n**

Don't Forget!!!!!!
TIFA's new
Anniversary tee shirt
celebrating 20 years!!
Visit our
website at TIFA.org for
sizes, availability and
ordering information.





Introducing our new Associate Lauren Johnson

Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Lauren Johnson and this is not my first time writing to you via the TIFA Newsletter. This is, however, my first time writing since I began working part time for TIFA starting in September. It has been almost six years since the last time I wore white, and sat on a bunk.

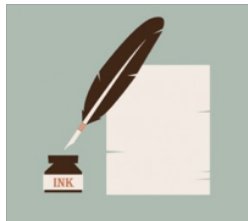
The last time that I wrote an excerpt for the newsletter I wrote that “I didn’t realize that there were people out here working hard to make changes that would impact my future, much less did I realize that I would eventually become one of those people.”

The last month, as I have started getting to know more of the different members of TIFA, I have been blown away! Coming in, I knew that TIFA had some amazing, caring, passionate people. But even knowing that and having high expectations about the people involved with the organization, my expectations have been exceeded in every way. In phone calls with members from across the state I have laughed, cried and been awestruck by the caliber of people who are supporting, advocating, and educating, to create a world that values people and fosters understanding.

As we head in to the holiday season, we should all take some time to be grateful for the hard work and dedication that family members across this big state are putting in.

I am grateful to be able to do this work alongside them! Thank you for allowing me to be part of your family! **n**

How Important is Writing?



By Terri LeClerc, Ph.D.

When you or your Loved One talks to an attorney, judge, parole officer, your words float in and back out. But when those same people have in hand a written piece, they can review what you’ve ‘said’—returning to important dates, for instance, or going back over the introduction.

So writing is, indeed, important to us. Let’s find a way to make the most impact: using a theme. Generally, conflict themes boil down to

- **man against man (a fight, a financial loss because of Someone),**
- **man against nature (a storm or tornado etc),**
- **man against technology (computers today, telephone apps), and**
- **man against himself (uh-oh).**

We need to take our story-- what it is we want the reader to remember-- and craft it. Incorporate these themes to connect to readers. Think back on how we all remember Star Wars or Harry Potter; their stories kept a clear theme!

Let’s use a dog story as an example (everyone loves dogs, right?). My friend Steve and his wife live in a house where the bedrooms are separated from the main living area by tall stairs. Their frisky dog wants to come down simultaneously every morning, but they could trip over him, so that’s a safety problem. They ‘taught’ old Fido to ‘sit’ until they reach the bottom. After a week, Fido put one paw on the second step. A few days later, both front paws. When Steve ran back up and said, “No! No!” Fido retreated-- for about a week. Again, one paw. Then two. Steve

and his wife tried to ignore Fido’s behavior. Soon, though, he had three paws on the step, with one technically still minding the law. Without repeated reinforcement, little Fido was gaming the system—because he could. After putting down this TIFA newsletter, you might remember Fido because his transgression is universal. We all know a Fido.

Many of us who want to write for representation, for leniency, for release have man-against-himself stories. We want the judge, the parole board, the future representing attorney, to see the Loved One as someone needing rules, needing supervision, needing a helping hand. He has been his own worse enemy, and realizes he needs help.

Or maybe not! Maybe your Loved One needs a different narrative, one stressing man against man: in a hostile environment, he was trapped into an action he regrets. Someone pushed him too far, and he snapped. Never before... or Since then, he ... or Recognizing how his button was pushed by that man in this circumstance, your Loved One has learned ... As you consider what you need the reader to remember, keep your universal theme in mind.

By crafting your letter, you can connect the reader with the shared humanity of your Loved One. When you stress a theme, he might change from just another number, just another case, into an individual who shares a common experience. Your reader won’t notice commas or spelling as much as your theme and the humanity of your story.

**Terri LeClerc, Ph.D.,
is the author of
Prison
Grievances:
when to write, how to write**

This fabulous graphic novel offers in cartoon form all sorts of hints, artwork, and check-lists for writing a successful grievance. You can order it through AmazonSmile. **n**



News from the Chapters

Houston Re-entry and Recovery Summit

By Dianna Williams



On Sept 23-24, The Community of Faith Church hosted the 2016 Returning Citizen's Re-entry and Recovery Summit in Houston, Texas. The theme of the event was "Removing the Stress and Implanting Hope in Re-entry."

Many of our returning citizens are affected severely by this maze of issues that seem to have no solutions and no real paths to a favorable conclusion.

1. **Residential:** There are few residential centers that are operative and available to returning citizens. Numerous reports are speaking to the ineffectiveness and inadequate housing and accommodations that are the "norm." In addition, most are far from the mainstream of services and resources that the residents need.
2. **Economical:** It is no secret that every person must have a method of generating income. Even if there are apparent physical needs that are not met, the need to feel self-supporting in some area is a necessity.
3. **Relational:** Every returning citizen has a need to be loved and appreciated. In addition, each person needs to feel that they are a contributor to the good of community and family.
4. **Medical:** We believe that Medical services can be provided to every person who needs assistance (counseling, guidance and examinations)
5. **Psychological:** Men and women returning to their community have a need for psychological evaluations, adjustments and treatment that is available and affordable.
6. **Spiritual:** We believe that no man is greater than his spirit. Bringing restoration, healing and validity to the spirit may be our greater challenges.

The annual event, was attended by formerly incarcerated and their families. The elected officials both local and statewide, law enforcement, former TDCJ official, ministers, and residential release center owners in attendance served on the closed panel on opening day of the summit.

Day 1 began with a Devotional service. The Ellis Unit was the featured unit to lead the service. a testimony from formerly incarcerated Cedric Powell was also heard. He was sentenced to 65 years for an aggravated offense in 1991, was paroled in 2013 and he had a very inspirational story to tell about acceptance, forgiveness and redemption.

The closed panel included Maureen McNeese, Mayor Turner's office, City of Houston Reentry Program, Senator John Whitmire, Representative Harold Dutton, and Bill Kleiber, Executive Director Restorative Justice Ministries Network. This is just a partial lists of panelists. Congresswoman Shelia Jackson Lee called in to speak for a few minutes on her way to Washington.

The discussions were focused on reentry and ways to reduce recidivism. A lot of talk about bail reform, disparity in sentencing, and how the reentry process is the most broken part of the system. Talked about TDCJ making our loved ones "street ready" early on in the incarceration process, prior to the parole review process. There was talk about an Ex-Offenders Bill of Rights being written or updated. One panelist stated that if we address education at the elementary levels with improved school funding, the reentry problems would not need to be addressed. We heard of the challenges our veterans have at reentry. The housing challenges, as well as job search, for all returning citizens was talked about in addition to relations, medical, psychological and spiritual issues. In closing, Senator Whitmire stated that everyone (we) need to hold our elected officials accountable and we need action, not studies.

Day 2 was just as powerful. Standing in Faith Ministries began the day with worship. There was an open panel consisting of formerly incarcerated, and others from the community who are working on reentry by volunteering,

mentorship, prison ministry, housing. Donald Lacy, TDCJ Chaplain was also on the panel.

There were several resource tables available with information about city programs, housing programs, voter registration, prison ministries, job search.

To sum it all up, TIFA can play a vital role along with other organizations in making sure that our loved ones get a chance at normalcy when they return. Be participative in the different events in your area that work along with our mission- support, educate and advocate. Visit with the representatives in your districts and get to know them. Plan to participate in the rally in Austin in February 2017. n

State Rep. Clardy Visits Nacogdoches/Lufkin Chapter

By Sherry Cramer & Melba Tiller

At the October Nacogdoches - Lufkin chapter meeting we had the honor of having Travis Clardy as our guest speaker. He is the current State Representative for Texas House District 11 that includes Nacogdoches, Rusk and Cherokee counties.

We shared our stories about our incarcerated family members, the issues that we as family members deal with and the struggles endured while dealing with TDCJ.

We presented Rep.Clardy with information about our hopes for legislative



State Rep. Travis Clardy in the middle of the back row with the Nacogdoches/Lufkin TIFA Chapter.

change regarding diligent participation for 3G offenses and independent oversight, as well as our parole reform goals.

While discussing ways to get our voices heard and gain the support of other legislators Mr. Clardy echoed the message that there is strength in numbers. He believes that many share our ideas for change and improvement within the prison system.

TIFA looks forward to working with Rep Clardy during the next Legislative session. [n](#)

Legislative News

By Lauren Johnson

As we prepare for the 2017 Legislative session, we have been talking to our ally organizations to find out what their legislative priorities will be as well. While TIFA has priorities, we also recognize that we are not the only organization fighting for more humane policy changes. None of us can make these changes alone.

The Texas Smart on Crime Coalition is a partnership between some of our ally organizations such as Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, The ACLU, Prison Fellowship, and Goodwill Industries, as well as the Texas Association of Business, Christian Life Commission, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation. All of these partners must be in agreement on the policy changes they fight for as a coalition. Here is their list of their legislative priorities for the upcoming session:

Raise the Age: Keep Kids Out of Adult Jails and Prisons

Currently, 17 year olds in Texas are automatically placed in the adult justice system. Locking up 17 year olds with older prisoners increases the likelihood they will reoffend. It is critical that Texas raise the age of criminal responsibility so that 17 year olds can be treated in the juvenile justice system when appropriate, but allow judges to transfer those younger than 18 into the adult system on a case by case basis.

Abolish Texas' Driver Responsibility Program

While the Driver Responsibility Program (DRP) was a well meaning idea created in 2003 to fund trauma centers, it has many unintended consequences. The reality is the DRP is making Texas more dangerous by creating severe economic hardship, putting more unlicensed drivers on the road, and limiting employment opportunities.

Smart Sentencing

Reduce penalties for certain minor nonviolent crimes. Many minor nonviolent crimes are punished as felonies instead of misdemeanors. Most individuals who commit these minor offenses do not receive treatment for addiction or mental illness while in prison, and they are released to a lifetime of barriers to employment and housing. Lowering penalties for minor nonviolent offenses will allow more people to be put on probation and will create opportunities for them to avoid future interactions with the criminal justice system. Use probation instead of incarceration for certain minor nonviolent crimes.

Probation is significantly less expensive than incarceration in county jail or prison, costing the state only \$1.63 per person per day. It should be the first punishment choice in many minor nonviolent cases.

Reduce probation revocations

When people on probation commit a technical violation, such as missing a meeting, their probation term may be revoked and they may be sent to prison, even if they did not commit a new crime. Technical violations are responsible for over 12,000 people being sent to prison each year, costing the state nearly \$250 million annually.

Increase Education and Training to Reduce Re-Incarceration

The harder it is for someone to find a job after release from prison, the greater the chance he or she will end up going back to prison. Texas should prioritize educational and vocational programs for individuals that are proven to reduce re-offending and increase workforce participation. It is also critical to ensure that criminal records

made available to potential employers are accurate.

There are so many more issues we would like to be fighting for, however to do so takes a lot of time, energy and people. So given the constraints that we have the priorities of TIFA as an organization are going to be:

Independent Oversight

The Ombudsman office is currently another branch of the TDCJ. We feel strongly that this is detrimental in terms of transparency and mediating effective solutions. The oversight of TDCJ needs to be an independent office. By creating an ombudsman that is not a part of the same system, we will be creating a more transparent system that is empowered to take actions to maintain integrity within the system.

Parole Reform

The court sets a minimum time standard at sentencing and the law sets the maximum standard. Thousands of people are denied parole based on static factors such as the nature of the crime. It is critical that people not be continuously denied parole when they are eligible solely based on historical factors. Over prescribed time in prison erodes the family support systems that might otherwise be available to people to assist in transitioning back to the community.

Work Time Credit

Diligent participation time credit should be awarded to ALL individuals, including non-violent and violent offenders, retroactively towards earlier parole eligibility. This would include time credit for completing educational programs, vocational training, treatment, work programs or participating in other productive activities. There should be a meaningful presumption of release at first eligibility, fashioned in a way that the majority of prisoners will be released at that time. Parole boards should not be authorized to deny release on the grounds that the prisoner has not served sufficient time for punishment purposes.

[n](#)



Why Join TIFA

By Vondre Cash

1. The families of the incarcerated need support. You need to know that you are not alone in this experience. Incarceration doesn't just happen to one racial or economic demographic—it knows no such barriers. Feelings of rejection and separation are not isolated to the incarcerated, they extend to their families. TIFA allows families experiencing the pain of incarceration to connect with others. We overcome various obstacles by forming a community of families that span the state and provide support for those who are in need. This community of families with shared experiences offers healing for a significant, yet forgotten segment of the Texas population.

TIFA supports its members.

2. TIFA is the primary social, penal, and political advocate for the incarcerated and their families. Through patience, hard work and dedication TIFA has established credibility with TDCJ officials, city officials, and state legislators, moreover, TIFA enjoys connections with several national organizations with established legislative influence in penal matters. TIFA provides the organizational framework to allow the voice of inmate's families to be heard. If we don't speak on behalf of our loved ones, who will? ***TIFA advocates on behalf of your loved ones who are incarcerated.***

3. Many families are simply unaware of various issues that negatively affect them and their loved ones. Vital information is disseminated through TIFA to families by newsletters, Facebook and even webinars. The ability of families to take action against egregious practices taken against their loved ones is directly related to their knowledge of those actions. Stated simply: ***TIFA keeps its members informed.***

4. TIFA understands the budget constraints of family members. That is why membership is extremely inexpensive. Membership contributions contribute to all the services described above—and much more. For TIFA to not only continue its good work, but expand in other much needed areas, it needs your assistance. The prison mantra of the necessity of commissary, mail and visits is still very relevant to sustain our loved ones during a difficult season. But for only \$25.00 a year, you can deliver a much wider scope of support to your loved one. ***Your voice matters. Join TIFA today!***

TIFA is celebrating our 20th anniversary and to share our happiness we are lowering our membership fee for the month of November. For new members joining during the next month Basic membership will be \$20 and \$30 for Basic Plus. If your family member signs up on-line the discount code is 1996. This offer expires December 15.

AND for our incarcerated friends and family, if you are currently incarcerated, with this form, you can order a copy of our newsletter for \$10 a year. This subscription will give you four (4) issues of our quarterly TIFA newsletter - The Contact.



To join visit our website at tifa.org or complete the form below and send with check/money order to:

**TIFA
PO BOX 300220
Austin, TX 78703**

Date: _____/_____/_____

☐ New Member? ☐ Renewing?

Name (please print clearly) _____

Address (please print clearly) _____

City/State/Zip (please print clearly) _____

Area Code and Phone (please print clearly) _____

Email (please print clearly) _____

Please enclose membership in the amount of:

- ☐ \$25 Basic-Includes one TIFA newsletter and access to 'Members Only' section of TIFA website
- ☐ \$35 Basic Plus – Includes **second** TIFA newsletter to one inmate address
- ☐ \$ _____ Donations are always cheerfully accepted!
A letter will be sent for tax purposes.
- ☐ I would like a free TIFA coin purse
(approved by TDCJ for visitation at the units)

Inmate's Name ((please print clearly) _____

Inmate is my (son, daughter, husband, etc.) _____

TDCJ Number _____

TDCJ Unit _____

Do you attend TIFA Chapter meetings? ☐ No ☐ Yes

If yes, which chapter? _____

Yes! I want to help with:

- ☐ Legislative Issues ☐ Chapter Development ☐ Fundraising
- ☐ Membership
- ☐ Other _____

Who referred you to TIFA? _____

Thank You!

With a Loved One Behind Bars, Life Can Be Stressful, Painful and Traumatic

Editor's note: The following article is being reprinted with the permission of Elizabeth Leenheer. She is the founder of the T.O.D.D. (Together Overcoming Darkness and Despair) Support and Advocacy Foundation, a family support group in Canada. This article refers to a scathing report on the way Correctional Service Canada communicates with next of kin when an inmate dies.

Howard Sapers, Canada's correctional investigator, issued a scathing report on the way Correctional Service Canada communicates with next of kin when an inmate dies.

Sapers said the Correctional Service Canada has not been compassionate, open or transparent with families. He cited a case where a family member arrived to view the body of his loved one at the appointed time but was informed the inmate had already been cremated. The ashes were couriered to him without prior notice, the report said.

Sapers made several recommendations, including that the correctional service quickly disclose as many relevant facts to families immediately following a death in custody, and that it release all mortality reviews and investigation reports to families in a timely manner, and in their entirety.

Elizabeth Leenheer: When I first learned of this report, I was hopeful. It illustrated that there are people who care, pay attention, ask questions and most importantly are courageous enough to speak up, share their stories and inspire others to do the same.

While this report identifies systemic issues, it also speaks of a larger narrative within our society — one that chooses sides and declares that you are either with or against those who commit crimes, that if you associate with, support and love prisoners you are somehow to blame and in favour of what they have done.

It is because of this narrative that those

with a loved one in prison are misunderstood and mistreated. It is why they often remain silent, anonymous. They live in darkness, full of despair.

'Someone I love has done the unthinkable'

Having someone you love in prison is overwhelmingly stressful, incredibly painful and terribly traumatic.

Howard Sapers, Canada's correctional investigator, says family members often have to fight for years to learn how and why their loved ones died in prison. (Patrick Doyle/Canadian Press)

My brother has been incarcerated for the last eight years and throughout this time I have struggled. I have spent time grieving, fighting, navigating, learning, educating, recovering and accepting the fact that someone I love has done the unthinkable and now lives in prison.

Throughout this time I have tried to establish and maintain a healthy relationship with my brother. I have attempted to hold him accountable, and to be consciously respectful of the life that he took and who his actions really hurt.

My brother committed a horrific murder that caused irreparable harm to a lot of people. I do not condone violence and I believe there must be consequences for taking a life. Yet I love my brother. Nothing that anyone can say or do will ever change that. To me, love is unconditional.

Family members judged, victimized

Prisons are cruel, dangerous and inhumane; prisoners are being neglected and abused. It is not socially acceptable to hug a thug, it is not the norm to want to help or care about prisoners, and those who do are criticized, rejected and attacked.

Being tough on crime gets attention and many people believe that our prisons are too soft. They call for more suffering and rejoice when it happens. I know the desire for vengeance is seductive and powerful, a human reaction that permeates our society.

I know that those with a loved one in prison are innocent. Yet they are scrutinized, discriminated against, stigmatized, misunderstood, judged and victimized.

Their feelings, experiences, wants, needs, grief and pain are often overlooked, dismissed and forgotten. I know this because this is my reality, a reality I have lived with for the last eight years.

At times, I carry shame for what my brother did, and am viewed and treated as though I too am guilty, through my association with him. I know that my experience is not unique and that it is the norm for the entire prison family.

We, as a society, express sorrow, disgust and outrage towards wrongdoers. We condemn the liars, the cheaters, the abusers and the murderers among us.

We are quick to point a finger, pass judgment upon and cast away from us those who harm the innocent.

This Sapers report reveals neglect of those in the care and custody of our correctional system. It shows that our own justice system is harming the innocent. We are no different, no better and perhaps even worse than those we are punishing, as we have become apathetic to this harm. We accept it.

Mistreating inmates hurts their relatives

We are not civilized, redemptive, compassionate or just when we allow the neglect and abuse of prisoners. In fact, we are guilty of the very acts we have outlawed. By mistreating prisoners, we are hurting those who love them; innocent friends, siblings, parents and children.

The disturbing irony of this report is that it shows that we have become what we fear, what we hate and what we condemn; that we have become the perpetrators and are creating more victims. We are perpetuating the cycle of harm and violence, behind prison walls, funded with our tax dollars.

After reading this report I am ashamed that I have accepted this unjust reality. Even though I am immersed in it, I was unable to fully comprehend what was happening. I am saddened by what this

report has shown, but I am still hopeful.

The unjust reality that we have created and allowed can be changed. It will change because we can do better, because we are better. When I think of the future, I know that where we are today is not where we are going to end up. If we choose to treat those who do harm with compassion, we can send them, their loved ones and ourselves a powerful message; one of hope and redemption.

I would like to dedicate this column to the memory of those whose lives have been taken and to those who suffer. May you find comfort in the fact that you are not forgotten, that you are not alone and that you have allies who care, pay attention and ask questions. They are courageous enough to speak out and share their stories, and hope to inspire you to do the same. **n**

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

Texas prison reform must get 'smart on people'

Op-ed by J Erschabek reprinted from the Houston Chronicle.

Focus should be more on rehabilitation, assessment in an effort to decrease the recidivism rate across the state.

August 24, 2016

As lawmakers get ready for the next legislative session, grappling with the budget is a priority.

Officials recently discussed reducing the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's budget by 4 percent by targeting "layoffs of correctional officers and reducing inmate health care, meals, and prison and parole operations." Texas could do more without compromising public safety.

Jerry McGinty, a TDCJ official, recently said that "it has been projected that TDCJ inmate population is expected to remain the same over the next five years." I would argue that it is the number of people admitted to prison and how long each person must stay that directly

affects the cost of the Texas prison system; the costs of correctional health care, personnel and other support add up quickly.

The main driver of the issue of over-incarceration in Texas falls squarely on the shoulders of legislators. They write laws that allow or require longer prison terms for certain types of offenses and longer percentage of sentences that must be served behind bars.

Legislators allow prosecutorial and judicial discretion with little accountability; prosecutors and sheriffs to protest parole; and allow the parole board's use of inadequate and subjective assessment tools in determining who qualifies for parole.

As a state, Texas has increased the average length of stay for people incarcerated, according to a 2012 study conducted by the Pew Center on the States. Texans now serve 36 percent more time than those released in 1990.

Even former Gov. Rick Perry recently said there is a problem with prosecutors when the gavel of the criminal justice system falls heavier on poorer communities and communities of color. "And when it comes to prosecutors, there are clearly bad apples in the system who care more about indicting someone - anyone - than they care about convicting the right person."

And "When ambitious prosecutors go overboard, the true victims ... are the people who don't have the means to fight back."

Now a report, "Crime Survivors Speak," which came out in April 2016, finds that victims of crime say they want to see shorter prison sentences, less spending on prisons and a greater focus on the rehabilitation of criminals.

The easy solution to release nonviolent drug offenders is not the only solution. There must be some proportionality of the sentence to the crime, even for violent crimes.

Currently, TDCJ has approximately 82,484 people interned who have committed violent crimes, and most are required to serve half of their sentence before parole eligibility. In reality, these people serve

approximately 66 percent of their respective sentences.

Thirty-five thousand prisoners with violent offenses are eligible for parole.

Releasing these people based on a thorough assessment of rehabilitation, institutional behavior and work ethic and releasing them just one year earlier to parole, at the current cost of \$54 per day to house them, would save the state \$690 million a year. (There are a total of 73,166 offenders currently eligible for parole, equaling a cost of \$1.44 billion per year.)

Violent crimes absolutely deserve serious punishment.

But we should not ignore or excuse irrationally harsh punishment simply because a person has done something violent.

The excessive sentences and low rate of parole for these individuals is counterproductive, costly and inhumane.

Lawmakers and government officials looking for ways to cut the budget without compromising public safety should allow prisoners to earn time toward their eligibility for parole.

All people serving time in TDCJ should receive diligent participation credit for the successful completion of an educational, vocational, substance abuse treatment or work program while confined.

This time would be included in the calculation of time needed to be eligible for a parole review and not a sentence reduction.

This solution will improve safety by incentivizing recidivism-reduction program participation and giving prisoners something to work for.

More focus and credit should be given to rehabilitation and assessment, and these men and women should be allowed to return home when they have paid the appropriate price for the crime committed.

We can intelligently reduce the sentences for violent offenses without compromising public safety.

Texas, let's not only get smart on crime, let's get "smart on people." **n**



Calling All Storytellers!!

We are beginning to collect stories. Why? Because stories are the way that we impact people, and policy. The first time I walked into the legislature to testify for a bill, and I saw that there were research and policy analysts there to talk about why passing the bill would be beneficial, I wrongly felt like those were the important people to have in the room. What I have learned in the time since then, is that while research and data are an important supplement, the thing that creates the biggest impact, is our personal stories. Stories are what connect us to each other, they help us see ourselves in others and the other way around!

If you have a story that would highlight the legislative priorities we have chosen we want to read it! For instance, an easy example is a story that would support the need for independent oversight. Please email your story to tifa@tifa.org or mail to TIFA, PO Box 300220, Austin, Tx. 78703

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TIFA Visits Incarcerated Veterans at the Ramsey Unit

By Jeremy Busby

Veterans Incarcerated Group member

TIFA is best known by those incarcerated for its unwavering support to their Loved Ones while dealing with the shocks and strains that accompanied TDCJ. After a recent trip to the Ramsey Unit, those dynamics were changed. Whether you are a family member of an incarcerated individual or confined in one of the many prisons throughout the state of Texas, TIFA is a driving force for prison reform and remains dedicated to assisting anyone who is affected by incarceration.

The Ramsey Unit's Veterans I

ncarcerated Group (VIG) hosted TIFA's executive director, Jennifer Erschabek for its summer meeting. Established in 1996, the same year as TIFA, The Ramsey Unit's VIG is comprised of over 100 honorably discharged veterans. Representing every branch of the nation's military branches, the VIG has rendered the same level of Service and sacrifice to those held at the Ramsey Unit, as they did throughout their military careers. It was in this spirit that compelled the group to connect TIFA with the incarcerated Veteran's community at Ramsey.

After an impeccable placement of the flags by the VIG's Color Guard, which includes veterans from the Vietnam, Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraqi wars, Jennifer delivered an informative and heartfelt keynote speech that highlighted TIFA's mission statement and 2016-2016 initiatives and legislative platform.

"We are tired of hearing (the labels) 'non-violent' and 'violent' offenders," said Jennifer when addressing TIFA's efforts to reform TDCJ's good time and work time policies. "People who have expressed remorse for their crimes, served their time, and have proven themselves worthy of release, should be let go!"

Throughout her keynote address, Jennifer related an extensive amount of criminal justice related information. In addition to highlighting TIFA's efforts to establish more transparency within TDCJ, Jennifer spoke passionately about her group's commitments towards the state of Texas establishing an independent oversight committee. By the conclusion of her speech Jennifer had spoke on TDCJ's budget cuts, the offender telephone system's price reduction, visitation improvements, and the overall human cost of mass incarceration. The VIG's members were overly empowered by her speech.

"Jennifer was awesome," said Ramsey Unit's VIG founding member Dana K. McIntosh, "She spoke with clarity and class. It was great for all of us to get a chance to hear first hand from someone who fights for us and our families so passionately."

"This was by far the most informative meeting we (VIG) have had," said VIG member Charles Williams.

The meeting ended with Jennifer taking

direct questions from those in attendance and was given a standing ovation.

"We were honored to have Jennifer here today," said McIntosh, a decorated Vietnam Veteran and former Captain in the US Army. We will share what she brought us with the rest of the Ramsey Unit's population."

For this group of veterans who have dedicated their lives to serving others, it was more than delightful to see that TIFA, Under Jennifer's leadership, is dedicated to serving Veterans during their incarceration.

Jeremy is a former staff writer of TDCJ's prison newspaper, The ECHO. n



An Easy Way to Support TIFA

Many of you have asked how you can help to support TIFA. You can help TIFA by connecting your purchases with these programs. It does not cost you anything other than time to sign up and using your card when you make purchases. Also, ask your family and friends to connect with these companies.

AmazonSmile – Go to smile.amazon.com and sign in. You can then connect your orders with TIFA.

Randall's/Tom Thumb – Take your Randall's card to the customer service counter and fill out an application for the Good Neighbor Program. All you need is your card number and the charity number for TIFA is **13339**. It only takes a minute and you can divide your donations between up to three charities.

Kroger – Go to Kroger.com and register or go to the store for a card. If you register on line, you can choose your own ID. The number to use for Kroger's rewards program for TIFA is **82117**. n



Texas Inmate Families Association

Strengthening families through support, education, and advocacy

TIFA
PO Box 300220
Austin, TX 78703-0004

CONTACT
Vol.21 No. 4 Oct 2016

TIFA Chapters

Amarillo

Currently Reorganizing
Check our website
www.tifa.org
for meeting information

Austin- Central

2nd Monday, 6:30 pm
AGE Center
3710 Cedar Street
Austin, TX 78703
(512) 371-0900

Beaumont

1st Tuesday, 6:30 pm
St. Jude Thaddeus Catholic
Church Family Life Center
6825 Gladys
Beaumont, TX 77726
(409) 617-8395

Conroe

Last Monday, 7:00 pm
Eagle's Nest Ministries
1450 Blake Road
Conroe, TX 77304
(281) 435-9908

Corpus Christi

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm
New Life Behavior Ministries
3833 S. Staples, Suite S-103
Corpus Christi, TX 78411
(361) 813-7106

Dallas

3rd Wednesday, 6:30 pm
Lover's Lane Methodist Church
9200 Inwood Rd Oxford Rm #103/105
Dallas, TX 75220
(817) 219-1628

Ft. Worth

1st Monday, 6:30 pm
St. Christopher Episcopal Church
3550 S.W. Loop 820
Fort Worth, TX 76133
(817) 798-9010

Houston

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm
Workfaith Connection
(Dacoma Location)
10120 Northwest Fwy 290 Suite 200
Houston, TX 77092
(281) 435-4143

Humble

2nd Thursday, 7:00 pm
First United Methodist Church
800 E Main St
Humble, Texas 77355
(936) 442-0859

Killeen - Harker Heights

2nd Thursday, 6:00 pm
VFW (Ladies Auxiliary)
201 VFW Dr
Harker Heights, TX 76548
(254) 289-9429

Nacogdoches/Lufkin

3rd Saturday 10:00 am
First Baptist Church
411 North Street
Nacogdoches, TX 65961
(936) 564-4546

Pearland - South Houston

3rd Tuesday, 6:30 pm
Manvel Bible Chapel
4230 FM 1128
Pearland, TX 77584
(713) 303-9785

McAllen

3rd Friday, 6:00
Calvary Baptist Church
Slayton Building 2nd Floor
1600 Harvey Drive
McAllen, Texas 78501
(956) 280-0951

San Antonio

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm
St. Vincent De Paul Catholic
Church Parish Hall
4222 Southwest Loop 410
San Antonio, TX
(210) 387-1558

San Antonio - North

3rd Thursday, 6:30 pm
St Marks Evangelist
Catholic Church
1602 Thousand Oaks Dr.
San Antonio, TX
(915) 204-5870

Tyler

2nd Thursday, 6:30 pm
Freedom Fellowship
2915 SSE Loop 323
Tyler, Texas 75701
(903) 504-9771

Waco

3rd Thursday, 6:30 pm
Waco Hispanic Chamber
of Commerce
915 La Salle Ave
Waco, TX 76706

Check our website and calendar for new TIFA Chapters starting near you. www.tifa.org

If you are interested in starting a TIFA chapter in your area, please contact the TIFA office. (512) 371-0900 or send an email to tifa@tifa.org