

Report on Corrections Reform  
June 15, 2022

Over the past six years, Vermont Interfaith Action has had an active Corrections Reform Local Organizing Ministry (LOM). This LOM began with a group from Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Burlington and has since expanded to include leaders from Christ Church, Presbyterian in Burlington, Church of the Good Shepherd in Barre, All Souls Interfaith Gathering in Shelburne, and Good Shepherd Lutheran in Jericho. In recent months, the group has mainly focused on effecting change for incarcerated women housed at the Chittenden Regional Correction Facility (CRCF) in South Burlington. We have done research with a wide variety of individuals who are involved in and have impact on the Department of Corrections (DOC). We have conducted research meetings with three different DOC Commissioners, staff at CRCF, service providers that offer programming and advocacy at CRCF, other interested non-profit groups, staff for the state employees labor union, legislators, and personnel from the Maine DOC. We have also held three public meetings, or Actions, to present our findings to the public and to ask for commitments from legislators and government staff for change.

As a consequence of these efforts, we have seen the DOC move towards adopting practices that will bring about a more humane and restorative model of incarceration. Strides have been made in preparation for release by improving training in job skills, connections to employers, a checklist for meeting the needs of those released, and access to housing. We also achieved reinstatement of the position of Director of Women and Family Services and improved professional standards and trauma-informed training for corrections officers, as well as more relevant programming for residents and greater investment in the Community High School. But we feel that the pace and degree of change in the system are not yet sufficient.

To be frank, we have encountered frustrations in our research, with various players in the system giving us differing accounts of what is taking place. After many attempts to set a meeting with the new Commissioner, Nicholas Deml, we finally got a meeting with him in February, 2022. Commissioner Deml told us that he shares the progressive ideals of his predecessor, Jim Baker, with whom VIA had a good and productive relationship. He is committed to treating staff and incarcerated individuals with “dignity and respect” and to continuing progress on a number of the recommendations that VIA made in our June 2021 action and which Interim Commissioner Baker and members of the Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee had already committed to. Those that were accomplished are mentioned above.

We asked Commissioner Deml what findings concerned him most in the results of a recent survey of the Springfield prisons for which the response rate was very high at 70%. (The survey was sponsored by UVM’s Justice Research Initiative, the DOC and the Washington-based Urban Institute.) He said he was particularly concerned about the mental health findings (e.g., 10% of staff and 36% of incarcerated individuals reported that they had considered suicide in the past year.) Commissioner Deml said he found the results of the entire survey “troubling” and that he and the governor are committed to confronting the challenges and making the necessary changes to address problems identified in the survey. One immediate step that he said is already being implemented is the creation of “innovation councils” composed of staff and incarcerated

individuals to get input and buy-in by making the stakeholders part of the process of identifying solutions.

On March 9, 2022, VIA's Corrections Reform LOM held a research meeting with Theresa Messier, who has been Superintendent of CRCF for the past 4 years. Theresa began working at the facility many years ago as a Corrections Officer (CO) and is committed to improving the lives of the incarcerated women in her care. Based on findings by the Moss Consulting Group, which was hired by the department, she has either implemented or is planning several initiatives to “soften” the environment visually and experientially. Changes include inviting UVM students to paint a mural in the dining room, establishing an advisory group composed of incarcerated women, instituting a Safety Matters training program in response to harassment issues identified in 2019, providing incentives for participation in classes, and even opening a clothing boutique. The pandemic has slowed the implementation of some changes, but the LOM was impressed with Theresa’s determination to improve the women’s experience at the facility.

By contrast, our research meeting on March 25 with Steve Howard, Executive Director of the Vermont State Employees Union, painted a different picture. He is very discouraged by what he terms the “humanitarian crisis” for Corrections Officers in Vermont’s system. Resignations are rampant, making the average CO turnover 44% and the current vacancy rate 33% of positions. Vermont CO starting salaries are the lowest in the country, making recruiting new hires difficult. Mandatory overtime results in 16-hour days and little time between shifts, resulting in incidences of employees falling asleep on the drive home from work or sleeping in the parking lot until their next shift. Physical and mental health problems and morale are at an all-time low, and this creates problems at home for the COs as well. COVID has exacerbated the problems that already existed – e.g., in 2017 the department authorized 17,000 hours of overtime, while in 2021, 34,000 hours were authorized.

According to Howard, the DOC’s response to the disturbing results of the recent climate survey of the Springfield prison, which reported the severity of the problems and even cited an increase in suicide rates among COs, was to express concern, but nothing substantive has been done or is planned. He believes there is a disconnect between management and employees. He says what is needed are procedural and policy changes, \$15-\$20 million more in the annual budget for salary increases, and culture change at the management level.

A more recent research meeting with Ashley Messier (no relation to Theresa Messier mentioned above), a long-time advocate for incarcerated women in Vermont, confirmed many of the concerns of Howard and indicated that reports to the legislative oversight committees by the current Commissioner, who has been on the job for about a year, have been more positive than actual numbers warrant.

All of this sometimes conflicting information, and the continued slow pace of change, can be daunting. But our LOM is committed to sustaining our efforts and rigorously applying our organizing methodology, which has proven successful on many issues throughout many years. The kind of transformative change that we seek does not come easily or quickly, but we have concrete plans to press for: 1) better working conditions for the corrections officers (including gradual wage increases, early retirement, and staggered shifts to reduce mandatory overtime), 2)

adequate funding and provision of rehabilitative services for incarcerated persons in corrections facilities and those released into our communities, and 3) a thorough examination of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed construction of new facilities versus possible alternatives so that we can weigh in on legislative decisions going forward.

It is our strong belief that by affecting these issue areas we can help to effect substantive systemic change on the entire corrections system.