

Postcards From a Prison Pandemic

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Moon Shot: Part 6
Money For Nothing

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My good friend and mentor Gordon Haas has facilitated a number of learning sessions at MCI-Norfolk since the launch of an education program we created at Lifers' Group Inc. called the Educational Discussion Group. Gordon's most popular offering is "Learning About Your Finances." During the course, Gordon runs a Stock Market Simulation that provides every participant with the opportunity to determine how best to invest their money. One of the unwavering rules of the simulation is that there is no credit. In other words, participants can spend only the money they have in their simulated accounts.

In the real world, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is currently struggling to live out the same principle. The House of Representatives is required to submit a balanced budget each year for approval by the entire legislature and the governor. Proposed budget notes for the upcoming fiscal year were put together in January, only weeks before the United States reported the first COVID-19 patient.

Since then, the Massachusetts economy has come to a halt. Consistent and stable sources of revenue, such as sales taxes and lottery sales, have evaporated. The Commonwealth now faces the reality that it does not, and will not, have the money to fund the government in the manner lawmakers had planned.

We are in the final quarter of the current budget year. By law, a new budget must be in place by July 1. Although, the state has been unable to meet that deadline over the past few years and has been forced to pass emergency supplemental budgets to keep state government running. This year, even the austere supplemental budgets will need to be cut as never before.

In this final edition of Postcards From a Prison Pandemic's "Moon Shot" series, we look at the upcoming budget battle and how that fight will provide the opportunity for unmatched reforms to the criminal punishment system.

Each year, Lifers' Group Inc. releases a report on how the DOC spends

its money. The group's last report, which covers the 2018 budget year, shows that the DOC spent \$625.5 million. The amount represented a 4.5 percent increase in how much the department had spent the previous year. Those of us who watch the DOC budget expected to see an increase in 2021, but I don't think any of us anticipated the \$743.6 million requested by the department.

If the DOC would have received the amount requested and the number of prisoners would have remained near the March 2, 2020, count of 7,368 prisoners, then the average cost per prisoner would have jumped to over \$101,000 for the year. In a COVID-19 world, however, there is no feasible way for Massachusetts to spend money that is much needed for healthcare, education, cities, and towns on outdated and overpopulated prisons.

To many entrenched and conservative lawmakers in the state, the need to select between prisons and other parts of the budget seems like a Sophie's choice, but it is not. Instead, it is an excuse to do the right thing fiscally. It is camouflage for much needed compassion. It is an opportunity to create an equitable justice system.

There are some who will say that once the Commonwealth's economy restarts, the revenue will come pouring into the state's coffers, so all we need to do is wait and limp along. But we do not know how long it will be before the Commonwealth's economy fully rebounds. It will not be in weeks; possibly not even months; perhaps not even years. This is the type of financial crisis that economists may measure in decades.

I would also point out that while the Massachusetts economy has performed well since returning from the 2008 economic meltdown, there were warning signs in place that all might not be rosy in the future. In June of last year, the University of Massachusetts in cooperation with the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston released a study called MassBenchmarks. I was reviewing the report last night. (Old economic studies were about the only thing in my cell I had not yet read during our lockdown.) In the study, Mark Melnik and Robert Nakosteen state, "an increase in warnings has signaled a possible weakening in the economy." The pair are quick to note, as of June 2019, that "it is too early to predict a downturn, but there are tangible, valid concerns." That was well before COVID-19.

It is beyond belief to think that the state budget will stabilize anytime soon. Given the need for widespread testing and other ongoing health services related to COVID-19 mixed with the federal government's lack of

leadership or support for states, COVID-19 costs in Massachusetts are going to continue to surge. And, with medical experts saying that there may be another outbreak in the fall that could coincide with the seasonal flu, we may be required to shut down part or all of the state's economy again. Add to that the speculation that COVID-19 may become a seasonal concern, and it is easy to see that the state must immediately adopt a new fiscal strategy.

Through this series, we have seen how the criminal punishment system operates like an assembly line designed to create prisoners, not justice. We have seen how prisons are full of people that should not be there. We have seen how impossible it will be for prisons to deliver the education and rehabilitation programs that are supposed to be their core mission. We have seen how those who have been sentenced can successfully exist in the public community. We have seen that the physical structures of prisons are obsolete. And we have seen that there is no money left to pay for outdated thinking.

I called this series Moon Shot because whenever I think of the enormous challenges in reforming the criminal punishment system that are ahead of us, my mind is drawn back to President John F. Kennedy's pledge at the start of his presidency to put a man on the Moon in less than a decade. Many of the folks working in the space program who knew how slowly the US was advancing toward space exploration thought the president was crazy to make such a claim. They knew the millions, if not tens of millions, of tasks that had to be met to meet the president's audacious goal. Many simply couldn't see it. But President Kennedy imagined a far different America than the one in which he lived. Yes, Kennedy's great strength was courage but it was equally matched by his imagination.

The torch of reform has been passed to each of us. It is up to us to dream big and dream fast. We are in a window of opportunity unlike any other in recent history to end the brutal norms that govern criminal justice in America. Through this series I have asked a lot of questions and offered a few suggestions. I come at this issue as one who lives the reality of prison each day. In some ways, my experience enlightens me and in other ways it blinds me. It will take all of us to solve the many challenges ahead.

It begins with imagination.