

Norfolk Inmate Council
Executive Board
MCI-Norfolk

Gas Lighting A Prison

(Creating a Toxic Prison)

MCI-Norfolk has been and continues to be the standard for Community, Civically engaged prisons for more than a hundred years in spite of the winds of change from Democratic to Republican administrations. However nothing has changed over the decades as the Visionary Founder Howard Gill experienced, the blatant attempt to dismantle the fabric of this great experiment. This all has come bubbling to a tipping point on April 11, 2025 when a relatively new event in the spirit of Mr. Gill's vision took place. Community Day (an event designed to bring the community groups, committees and religions together) which by all attendees prisoners and volunteers alike thought was wonderful, great and needs to take place at all facilities.

However the Administration and security staff quickly began their attempts to malign the event as "A disaster!" The Gas Lighting (escalation of tensions or instigating) began to rise to another level by security staff at this point. Security Staff have been more aggressive with their actions and behaviors since this event. Administration has also been part of this, with implementing visitor discouragement practices without a public hearing. Property is being destroyed by staff, leaving their posts and searching cells. There seems to be a concerted effort to escalate the climate of the prison until an event occurs, then the Administration can do what they want and lock the prison down as other higher security facilities once and for all destroying Howard Gill's efforts.

Prisoners are aware of it and those doing all the positive activities believe this needs to be exposed before the plan to turn the DOC back in the other direction. The DOC continues to be one of a system of change and the culture of punishment rains supreme and always present. One would think that with the low crime rates and prison populations at nearly half of the highest point. "Lock them up and throw away the key" would be over. But it's not. The DOC in the face of a population of about half of the maximum number has an astronomical budget could better serve the community in schools that suffer high crime and drop out rates. Alternatives to prison is the key. But the DOC continues down the path of spending more than 75% of their budget on staffing (security) and just 2% on rehabilitation. To remind us all that most staff came to prison to punish not rehabilitate. The old head of the Union said, I'll fight every penny used for rehabilitation and programs because it is taken from my officers budget. Unfortunately this is still the prevailing mind set of the DOC and it's staff.

The DOC is currently in a struggle with Substance Use Disorder (SUD's) and rather than treat the disease it is treated as a disciplinary issue. When the Norfolk Inmate Council (NIC) tries to engage the Administration in dialog as to trying to find a means of treatment for this disease the DOC stance is "We are not going to legalize drugs." The hopelessness is ignored and when prisoners ask for help such as staying in a segregation environment for a few weeks to "detox", the new method is to have the tactical team suit up and and proceed

with a use of force and drop the individual back into population as one prisoner said "Like a dog."

Over the past years we have suffered many attacks on our dignity. Substandard food which shows more food waste than is being consumed.

Calls for help and ideas have been presented in an SUD / Mental Health report and a method of Treatment over Punishment (TOP),
(~~loisahrens@comcast.net/writings~~). * Overuse of naloxone (Narcane) for clear K2 of up to 5 times which "triggers immediate and painful withdrawal. Failure by staff / administrators after K2 incidents to seek means to provide supportive treatment options. Weaponizing the K2 crisis to implement harsh corporal punishment in the form of loss of privileges; Side by side seating in the visiting room, cooking items, recreation time. These loses are all inflicted on prisoners with program engagement (facilitation) and positive behavior. This creates animosity between staff and prisoners in effect gas lighting the population. Barring prisoners from self improvement groups. Movies that are only PG-13 and treating grown men like children. Defunding programing budgets. Placing barriers to positive cultural and community events.

This in the face of what seems to be a promising initiative from the Vera Institute and DOC called D4D or "Design for Dignity". However if this is taking place and dignity continues to be eroded in all facets of the prison this once again is window dressing without meaning. This reminds me of the misplaced priorities in the DOC. MCI-Norfolk has some 50 maintenance staff up from 12 just 10 years ago. However maintenance staff are tasked with placing a new ornamental gate and benches in the front of the prison instead of: repairing structural issues; roof leaks in cells creating black mold, window repairs allowing cold air in the winter cold, patching of asbestos wall board thus creating long term exposure, etc.

It seems once again the shift to the culture of punishment was swift under Governor Weld, however the shift to treatment and rehabilitation has barriers which require meaningful and authentic attention.

Sincerely,

William J. Duclos
Majority Co-Camp Chairman

* *www.realcostofprisons.org/writing*