

## THE LIFER'S GROUP INC. VS. THE BOA CONSTRICTOR

By Gordon Haas  
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I have often wondered what it would be like to have a boa constrictor wrapped around me and slowly squeezing out my breath. Each time I would inhale, the snake would tighten its grip until I could breathe no more. As Chairman of the Lifer's Group Inc. (LGI), I am figuratively sensing what that would feel like. The imagery of the boa constrictor accurately portrays what LGI at MCI-Norfolk is experiencing in dealing with the Department of Correction (DOC).

LGI was formed as a corporation under Massachusetts' laws in 1974. It has been active continuously for the subsequent fifty years. We have an elected Board of Directors, as required by the Corporation Division of the Office of the Secretary of State. Our membership includes those at MCI-Norfolk serving life sentences and those who are not. Our primary goal is to educate our members on matters that impact their lives. This includes legislation, legal topics, disciplinary procedures, restoring our right to vote, responses to correctional policies and procedures as well as maintaining and enhancing family connections.

To fulfill that purpose, LGI has sponsored family events, picnics, legislative seminars, introduced Education Discussion Groups (EDG) designed to teach various topics of interest to our members like financial literacy, advanced math, critical writing, Spanish and civics. In addition, LGI implemented a Reading For The Blind program, sponsored 10K runs to raise funds for local charities, constructed wooden, child-safe toys which were donated to area hospitals and homeless shelters, painted various rooms in the institution as well as extensively renovating MCI-Norfolk's chapel. In addition, LGI created a Theater Arts Program with members performing plays for the MCI-Norfolk population and even traveling to other prisons in Massachusetts. All of these activities gave our members opportunities to give back

to society in some small measure for the harm we have caused.

The vast majority of those efforts, save the Education Discussion Groups and legislative seminars, have been terminated inexorably, one-at-a-time, over several years. The terminations came not because our members had abused any of the programs or privileges associated with them. Rather, the terminations occurred as DOC personnel introduced new philosophies and resultant changes seemingly with little or no appreciation for what LGI members had accomplished to bring a more positive environment to MCI-Norfolk.

Lest anyone think this is a paranoid rant, allow me to provide a few examples. First on the list are volunteers from the outside community. They have served as a vital link with society beyond the walls of Norfolk. Volunteers have assisted in contacting speakers to address our general membership at meetings as well as legislators and outside organizations actively involved in criminal justice reform. Today, we have no volunteers and have been told we cannot have any.

The reason lies in the fact that the DOC has unilaterally designated LGI as what the DOC calls a Self-Improvement Group. Then the DOC decided that Self-Improvement Groups cannot have volunteers. Ergo, LGI lost our volunteers while the DOC simply ignored the vital role volunteers have played in LGI's success.

Second on the list are guest speakers. Pre-COVID, when we found an outside speaker willing to meet with our members, we would submit the name(s) and affiliation(s) to the Director of Treatment at MCI-Norfolk for approval, vetting and scheduling a date to enter the institution to meet with our members. The whole process took only one or two weeks.

Today, we are actively discouraged from having contact with potential outside speakers. Rather, we are now expected to submit the name(s) of proposed speaker(s), without having any knowledge of their interest in speaking to our group, to the administration sixty days in advance. The Director of Treatment is then

required to contact the person(s) out-of-the-blue and, if there is an interest, submit the name(s) to the Central Office in Milford for their approval. The process now, if successful at all, takes over two months. If the DOC's intent has been to limit the number of guests speaking to LGI members, then the DOC has been spectacularly successful.

Third on the list are subcommittees. LGI operates under a set of By-Laws which contain descriptions of various subcommittees designed to work on particular areas of interest to our membership. For instance, there is a Parole Subcommittee which assists members and non-members in preparing for parole hearings. In addition, LGI, through that subcommittee publishes a Parole and Commutation Manual which is distributed to any prisoner who desires a copy, including prisoners in institutions other than MCI-Norfolk.

In addition, there is a subcommittee which addresses various pieces of legislation affecting lifers and seeks to gather support for those potential bills which are believed to be most pertinent. We have been told, once again, that as a Self-Improvement Group, we cannot have subcommittees.

Forth on the list is our Education Discussion Group (EDG) program. Prior to the pandemic, we had worked closely with the then Head Teacher to develop educational opportunities, particularly for those prisoners unable to attend school due to work assignments or who had their high school diplomas or the equivalent, but were not in the college program. We had been assigned a dedicated classroom and had access to a computer for creating course curricula. EDG classes in total contributed up to 100 students on the school rolls each school year.

After the institution emerged from COVID lockdown, I was summoned to the school by the new Head Teacher. I was told to remove all EDG materials. Not only were we no longer able to use the classroom, but the computer had disappeared as well. No one seemed to know where it was, who took it or why, nor was anyone

inclined to try to locate it. Gone were hundreds of pages of course materials.

Today, EDG is a mere shadow of its former self. We meet for only two nights per month, rather than five days a week, morning, afternoon and nights. Proposals to reinstate EDG to its former status as a once vibrant program have fallen on deaf ears.

Fifth on the list is LGI's Community center. Space had been set aside for the Community Center to afford elderly prisoners, whether serving life or not, a place to meet and interact with each other. Specific programs such as Reading For The Blind were to be revived. LGI members had cleaned and renovated the space as well as providing games, books and other supplies including coffee and/or tea. Two television screens had been installed with capability of allowing attendees to listen to programs through headphones without disturbing others. Tables and chairs have also been procured.

The Community Center opened, but remained so for less than two weeks. The space was suddenly appropriated for other use. Then COVID entered the picture and the Community Center was never reopened, despite repeated attempts to revive it which were presented by LGI to the administration.

Sixth on the list is our Board of Directors. As noted earlier, LGI, as required by the Corporation Division, has a duly elected Board of Directors since LGI's founding in 1974. We have now been informed that, since LGI has been designated as a Self-Improvement Group by the DOC and that the DOC's own regulations pertaining to Self-Improvement Groups do not allow Board of Directors, we cannot, ipso facto, have a Board of Directors.

Seventh on the list is the posting of notices. For years, LGI and other groups posted notices of meetings for members in the various housing units in the prison. Included in those notices were an agenda for the meetings, the dates of the next meeting, and the names of any guest speakers. A few months ago, we were notified

that notices would no longer be allowed to be posted in the units, ending this useful communication vehicle.

Eighth and last on the list are reminders sent to our members as to when LGI meets. In response to the elimination of notices, we began to distribute individual notices of each of our meeting times. The administration terminated that procedure on the grounds that there is a schedule of events on the tablets and adults should know when the meetings are being held.

The question which plaques me is: Why? Why is the DOC so committed to eviscerating a group which has functioned effectively for over fifty years? I have tried to provide just a brief picture of what we have accomplished and the setbacks we have experienced. Yet, the DOC's actions begs the question: How can the DOC construe their constrictions as positive steps forward for MCI-Norfolk? The DOC appears to see no value in what we brought to MCI-Norfolk in the past, in the present, and the potential to do so in the future.

Why the DOC continues to systematically dismantle what LGI has accomplished since 1974 remains a mystery only they can answer. What I do know is that we are having the life slowly sucked out needlessly. We must look forward to the new commissioner, if he or she is ever hired, bringing in a wave of new administrators who will be far more progressive and appreciative of what we have to offer to make MCI-Norfolk a better place for all. It is time for the boa constrictor to unwrap itself and let the LGI breathe freely again.

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