

May 14, 2024

An Open Letter to State Legislature

To Whom it May Concern,

During the 2022 and 2023 grow seasons I volunteered in the community garden here at NCCI-Gardner. The *Community Garden Project* – run by inmates – grows vegetables and fruit (tomatoes) for donation to charitable organizations in the greater Gardner community. The food is picked, bagged, and transported to the local food bank, women’s shelter, and veteran’s home. We have received nothing but compliments in regards to this program and the recipients of our donations provide encouraging feedback that keeps us motivated and focused.

Between 2022 and 2023 we grew, and donated, over 4,750 pounds of produce. Our garden is less than 2,500 sq. feet. Now – bear with me here – imagine expanding this project into the seemingly endless tracts of land that sit empty across state prison grounds. You could grow upwards of 50,000 pounds of fruit (tomatoes) and vegetables with minimal investment in plants, seeds, and labor. A program such as this would also offer incarcerated individuals an alternate form of programming. Incarcerated people who have spent years in the confines of a cell working with their hands, growing plants from scratch, and assisting the state in providing food for families in need. And, as we have learned here at NCCI-Gardner, the physical and mental (health) benefits of growing vegetables extends well beyond eating fresh tomatoes, green peppers, and onions, it is a path to inner healing and recovery.

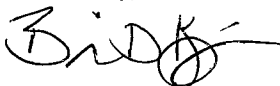
With that in mind, would you consider taking an even larger leap in logic with me?

*Expanding DOC programs such as the Community Garden Project may be an excellent way to reduce the rising food costs associated with housing migrant families in Massachusetts. MCI-Norfolk is located less than half a mile away from Bay State Correctional Facility and could easily grow enough produce to feed migrants housed within the facility a broad array of vegetables throughout the summer months into early fall. You could even start a community gardening project at what was formerly known as Bay State Correctional Facility.*

Incarcerated individuals in the Massachusetts Department of Corrections are underutilized and undervalued. The efforts of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections to garner public distrust of incarcerated people has led to the termination of almost all community involvement projects in prisons across the state. In order to help stem the tide of negative public perception as it relates to incarcerated individuals, a PR campaign of this nature – in which incarcerated people assist in a large-scale community project – might help create awareness of the tangible benefits incarcerated people may have on society if offered appropriate guidance. The current administration seems to be moving in this direction anyway, but there hasn't been any sweeping change inside the Massachusetts Department of Correction. While this idea may seem radical, I assure you it's perfectly feasible. Bay State Correctional Center, NCCI-Gardner, and MCI-Norfolk would be the perfect prisons to begin pilot programs to see if this idea could be implemented in every correctional facility state wide.

I can rant on and on and say all kinds of negative things about the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, but what's the sense? Change comes through effort and action. I am writing this letter and offering an actionable idea. Even if my idea is shunned and negated, I challenge every representative in the State of Massachusetts to consider an alternate idea. Together, we can make a positive change in prisons across the state. Together we can send the old guard a message that their days are numbered. Together, we can heal incarcerated individuals through patience, understanding, and opportunities for personal betterment. Thank you.

Sincerely,



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