

FROM THE ALTERNATIVES LIBRARY

Update on Prison Projects

by Lynn Andersen

During the past year, the Alternatives Library programs for prisoners have expanded and evolved. Our initial program, focusing on enrichment programs for incarcerated youth, is now one that is giving attention to parole preparation and aftercare. Our national prison program, Prisoner Express, remains mainly one of sending out hundreds of books to prisoners. In addition, there has been an effort to start pen-pal programs and to offer special writing and art programs to prisoners.

The juvenile program at MacCormick Center is now being developed by an AmeriCorp VISTA volunteer who is expanding what was done by the previous VISTA person. The VISTA, Sherry Tackill, is in charge of creating a volunteer base and training volunteers to help incarcerated youth at the facility prepare to go before the parole board with a detailed plan for what they will do upon release. A volunteer acts as a mentor who can help one of the young men at the Center discover what resources are available for his benefit in the community where he will be returned upon release.

Part of the work is putting together a database of community organizations that are doing youth advocacy programs in the urban centers where most of the youth were arrested. I've been working closely with an inmate who was in juvenile corrections and who has related some great ideas to help the residents upon release.

The good news is that there is a growing interest in New York State to put more resources into this type of program. Since we have a

head start doing the research and program creation, what we are doing has the potential to become a model for other facilities. With the New York State changes to the Rockefeller Laws calling for reduced sentencing for nonviolent drug-related crimes, there will be more people released from prisons and juvenile facilities. This will create a demand to meet the growing need for individuals and programs that can shepherd young men who have no idea where or how to begin putting their lives back together.

One area that we feel needs a lot of work is all aspects of computer training. Without knowledge of the technology of today, there is little chance that the kids coming out of prison are going to find work that will keep them interested enough to remain off the streets. We have focused a lot of time on upgrading computers and finding people who can teach all levels of use. Upon release, we recommend that the youth utilize the public libraries near home. This may be the only access some of the young people we work with will have to computers. Unfortunately, the services provided by libraries in different areas are uneven and sometimes quite deficient in computer technology areas. Though the state has identified the problem, the reality still remains that many inner city and poorer rural areas do not have adequate services to meet the needs of today's youth. This will be one of the areas we address when offering recommendations to youth advocates and juvenile detention administrators regarding necessary services to urban and rural youth being released from the prison system.

These young people will get out of prison. When they do, there needs to be in place all the possible resources to help them remain free and move on with their lives.

In our other area of prison work, we are dealing with a completely opposite problem. Most of the men and women who write to us from corrections facilities all over the country are in for the long haul. The challenge here is to help prisoners have better access to printed materials, outlets for their creativity, and activities that can help pass the time in a meaningful way.

As I said above, our main work is getting books into the hands of prisoners. The challenge is that each state has different regulations regarding how and what can be received. To make matters more

difficult, the rules can change from facility to facility within the same state. Trial and error has been the name of our game. We maintain a database with information on the different prisons and their requirements.

Because we are a library, we are able to get books into the prisons with a minimum of problems. Since there are rules governing who can send items into a maximum security prison, programs like ours are only possible when done through libraries or non-profit agencies set up to do the specific task of book mailing. Books thru Bars is one such organization. Also, libraries always have a constant stream of book donations and discards that aren't used by the institution but are much needed in prisons.

As a first contact, we have gone directly to prison libraries to find out what services they offer to inmates. There again, it is different from one facility to another. Prisoners on lockdown and in maximum security facilities have less access to books, while medium secure prisons often offer regular access to library materials. Since many of our prisoners are in max facilities, we mail most of our books to individuals. Many of those individuals have no other contact with the world outside. They have been abandoned by friends and family.

In addition to books, the Alternatives Library publishes a newsletter, *Prisoner Express*, 3-4 times a year. We bulk mail it to prisoners for free. Those who choose to do so, can share their writings through our newsletter. Inmates are given a questionnaire with choices about programs of interest, and they decide whether or not they want their names or writings used. We never want them to feel coerced about what is theirs, and we make it very clear that their decisions one way or another will not affect their getting books.

Gary Fine, who oversees the program, has been successful at raising money as it is needed to do the different programs we are offering. He has also found a number of dedicated volunteers and school groups that bring ideas, energy and fundraising efforts to the program. A number of the volunteers write and receive letters from prisoners. The library is the receiving and mailing center for this pen pal program. The outpouring of support from the community has been incredible. Our last fundraiser included local musicians, poets

and former prisoners who talked about the importance of having contact from the outside world. Our next community fundraiser will be a reading of prisoners' writings by community members.

There are over 2,000,000 people locked up in this country today. Somewhere, not far from each and every one of our homes, there is a prison where men and women live and hope they won't be forgotten, disappeared. So, in the end, the programs have very little to do with books or writing. These are just ways we can reach out and say you're human, you're known, you're not forgotten.