

March 20, 2012

M-PAC Update Letter

Greetings,

M-PAC volunteers and colleagues from NAACP have been talking to branches of Maine government about an overall sentencing review. Maine needs an entire review, possibly by The Sentencing Project. While we don't yet know the outcome, we'll continue to work on this.

M-PAC and other groups managed to hold back the gang bill, as we did the private prison bill.

We are in discussion with MDOC about the new public database, trying to bring it in line with the federal prison database. Maine's database, which came as a surprise to almost everyone, is one of the most intrusive in the country. M-PAC, NAACP, and ACLU met with MDOC about this in early March and will follow up in April.

As you have probably heard, a new health care contract will be in place by July 1st. Although Corizon – the present provider – can submit a proposal, the general feeling (and hope from advocates) is that they will not get the contract. Proposals must be submitted by end of March. We are hopeful that the new company will want to be in touch with M-PAC and other groups for our input and recommendations. We are always grateful to hear names of health care staff that are doing what is needed, as well as names of those who aren't. Plus we are glad to know specifics about problems with health care, medications, treatment, and positive or disrespectful staff behavior toward inmates. We are doing what we can right now, but feel that things may not improve until July 1st. We are sorry about the difficulties people experience.

If a new company comes in they will probably not keep the same administrators and doctors. They may keep the same line staff (nurses, LPN's and the like) but we hope they will not retain disrespectful staff.

This news is scant help to those suffering now. People often write to tell us about individual problems, and when we have permission we address individual situations. On the other hand, even without permission, we can sometimes address situations in general so please continue to write about these issues. Sometimes when we report problems they are remedied, and sometimes they are not, as you know.

We learned that there haven't been many complaints about the mailroom (new envelope policy, other problems) sent to the Commissioner. We suggest that people write letters about mailroom problems, if any, though we know that some folks hesitate to do this. That's the only way the Commissioner can know that problems exist with mail policies. We've heard some adjustments may happen in allowing envelopes to be retained when they relate to legal cases, such as notices coming from court. We haven't heard whether this exception has happened.

We understand that good time, if changed, will be in increments. Trying to make things equal could be the first step (same job merits the same amount of good time, whether behind the wall or working in the community). Changes in good time would go through the legislative process, initiated by the MDOC. If more issues around good time are addressed at the same time as work equality good time that would be a good thing, but we don't yet know. We expect something to be ready for the next legislative session and will keep encouraging.

We hear from MDOC that there is more emphasis on humane treatment of inmates. We know about some examples of this and some reassignment of staff when they abuse positions of power. When reporting will not jeopardize an inmate, M-PAC tells the MDOC and other agencies about incidents where staff acts in the old habitual way. Yet we see certain people still in positions of power who haven't changed their behavior toward prisoners. We were hopeful that there would be even more changes by now, but, at the same time, we feel a little more positive about the emphasis on behavior changes in general. Recently we've heard that some long-time staff people are leaving but we haven't confirmed that. The overall question is – are more things better than a year ago? Advocates from M-PAC and NAACP continue to advise the MDOC on policy changes needed, and those that are not working. Advocates depend on incarcerated Mainers to advise on what is happening.

M-PAC is sometimes quoted in the press about support of MDOC changes, even when not enough changes have been made. Advocates ask that incarcerated people continue to trust that M-PAC is aligned with knowledge of the reality even if certain quotes are extracted in interviews. Advocates must try every available avenue, and search for support among allies. It's also very important to acknowledge positive steps from MDOC when that happens.

M-PAC and advocacy colleagues are working/meeting regularly with the Commissioner with some good results. Yet the Maine prison system is a *titanic* of a problem to begin to turn around. All input from inmates is used where it might have some effect for change.

Some of you have received several issues of “*Beyond the Bars*” newsletter. Please note that this newsletter isn't published by M-PAC and we have nothing to do with the editorial content. We know the folks doing this newsletter and are grateful for their efforts and for the inmates' writing and art. We're also thankful that the editors of *Beyond the Bars* have allowed M-PAC to include notices of meetings and other news.

We know that most people on the inside understand that M-PAC consists of *volunteer* efforts from a few people. M-PAC membership is large, but people doing the hands-on work are limited. Time sometimes isn't available, which means letters can't be answered quickly. Every letter is read and is often acted on even before a response is sent to the inmate him/herself. Advocates would like to do much more, and we are glad that some impact can happen. If you have friends or family interested in assisting M-PAC, we welcome their assistance! M-PAC's next meeting is Saturday, June 9th in Manchester, 9:30 am -12:30 pm.

We're grateful to everyone we work with including advocacy groups inside the prison and outside.

Good wishes to all.

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