

# ISSUES AND ACTIONS

August 2005



***Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical and spiritual potential of humanity.***

THE EARTH CHARTER, I.B.

Abu Ghraib? Guantanamo Bay? What has transpired in those places has been brought to our attention by the media, and we reject the degradation and torture of the prisoners involved as denial of many of our most cherished values. But these incidents are far away, foreign, over there, not here.

For those of us who minister daily within our state prison system, however, the perversion of what is called “corrections” is all too familiar, and all too close. While there is no question that inmates must be incarcerated for the protection of society, at the same time they remain human beings who should be treated humanely while they serve their time.

At the end of June, Judge Thornton Henderson, after hearing extensive testimony from reputable physicians who had been assigned to examine the health care of inmates in California state prisons, ruled that the Department of Corrections was incapable of providing adequate health care to the 164,000 plus inmates in the system. He declared that the only remedy was to turn prison health care over to federal officials. Preventable deaths of inmates are occurring at the rate of more than one each week in our state. There are many more individuals who suffer permanent serious health problems because of medical neglect, mismanagement of illnesses and misdiagnosis by some physicians known for their incompetency. This is in spite of the fact that over \$1 billion is allocated for prison health care.

There are many well intentioned and conscientious officers, who are fair minded and not ruthless in their exercise of the total power they yield over the inmates in their care. Unfortunately, however, there are far too many others who look upon their charges as somewhat less than human, and have many opportunities to vent their passions in vicious ways. At times, one can overhear such officers bragging to one another about how they continued to bang an inmate’s head against the concrete or kick him with their heavy boots while he lay handcuffed and face down on the ground. If an inmate dares to complain about maltreatment, he is often put in confinement and harassed to the point where he withdraws his charges.

In 2003, during a lockdown, when inmates were being fed in their cells, an inmate reached out through his partially opened door to take his tray. As he did so, the officer in control of the iron door suddenly slammed it shut, shattering bones in the inmate's hand. No medical help was given for the injury, as to do so would reveal what had happened. From that day forward, however, the inmate refused to accept his food through the door — and, when the lockdown was over, he did not go to meals. He slowly starved himself to death. No attempt at intervention was made during this time, although officers working in that building had to be aware of his situation. This incident is well documented, as are many others that seem unimaginable to most of us. Because of the officers' "code of silence" it is often difficult to know such facts, but sometimes they do come to light, as this one did.

Although many men are lifers or have long sentences, most of them will sooner or later be released back into society. The prison culture, injustices, lack of educational, vocational and rehabilitative resources make it all the more difficult for parolees to function on the outside once released. . . and so the cycle continues.

***Crime and corrections are at the intersection of rights and responsibilities.***

***Those who commit crimes violate the rights of others and disregard their responsibilities.***

***But the test for the rest of us is whether we will exercise our responsibility to hold the offender accountable without violating his or her basic rights. Even offenders should be treated with respect for their rights.***

***The common good undetermined by criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and policies that seem to give up on those who have broken the law (offering too little treatment and too few alternatives to either years in prison or the execution of those who have been convicted of terrible crimes) — Catholic Bishops of the U.S., 1998***



What can we do?

Keep aware of bills passing through the state legislature, and speak out against those which seek to be more punitive. Support legislation that offers help and hope to inmates and their families. Try to make others conscious of the problems of our prison system. Seek out families of inmates — moms, dads, grandparents, children, wives and offer support and understanding as you learn what the impact has on them — emotionally, financially, etc.

Submitted by a member of the Social Concerns Committee