



Department of Justice

REMARKS

BY

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AT

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON LITERACY AND CORRECTIONS

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It gives me a great deal of personal satisfaction and pleasure to be here today with you in this beautiful city, and to share the generous hospitality of our Canadian hosts.

I know you also share with me the enthusiasm about literacy that our First Lady, Barbara Bush, expressed in her remarks earlier this week. Indeed, the fact that Mrs. Bush's interest led her to attend and address this conference is not only testimony to her personally, but also to the high priority that literacy issues have today in our country.

While in many nations today, basic literacy has not yet been achieved for ordinary citizens, it is truly noteworthy that the countries represented here are so strongly determined in their efforts to provide literacy programs to its criminal offenders.

Actually, speaking to this group today in some ways reminds me of a story about Frankie Frisch, the manager of my hometown Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team some years ago. Frisch was being heckled mercilessly throughout a ballgame by a loud-mouthed fan, who kept shouting instructions about how the game should be played.

After the game was over, Frankie went to the man and politely asked his name and address. Flattered, the heckler told him, and then asked why he wanted to know.

Because," Frankie replied, "I'm gonna be at your office bright and early tomorrow morning to tell you how to run your business."

Now I'm certainly not here today to try to tell you how to run your business. But education issues in general, and literacy in particular, are very close to my heart. And so for a few minutes, I want to discuss mandatory literacy programs in the Bureau of Prisons, express my views on prison programs in general, and then touch on the importance of volunteers in the correctional process, and how all of these factors can blend together to further the cause of true rehabilitation.

As Mike Quinlan mentioned, when I served as governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, we had a number of important reform issues on our agenda, and at the top of the list was education.

We received a very satisfying level of recognition for those programs -- satisfying particularly because of the results we saw in students, young and old, who benefited from them and became better equipped to be fully-functional citizens.

Now, of course, in the United States, we have a Department of Education that has as its sole objective the improvement of our educational system throughout the fifty states. But as

Attorney General, I have a distinct educational constituency of my own -- some 58,000 Federal prisoners confined in our correctional institutions.

In our prison system, the process of meeting inmates' educational needs starts with identifying, as precisely as we can, the different kinds of people who find themselves in prison and developing specific programs for them. We provide different security level facilities for prisoners, whom we categorize on the basis of their crimes and their personal backgrounds.

Once that categorization has been made, program needs are identified and specific programs recommended. This process provides the basis for more effective, more efficient use of our resources.

With some exceptions, our approach has been to try to provide a full range of programs at every federal prison. We have done this in the hope that every inmate can leave prison a better person than when he or she entered.

There is a general consensus that basic literacy not only helps the prisoner after release but, equally important, contributes to a better life while in prison and to a safer environment for both staff and inmates.

If one takes the eighth grade level of functioning as a benchmark for minimum literacy functioning -- and I know there are many who would argue that is far too low a level in our highly technological world -- then about 20 percent of all Federal inmates in the U.S. are illiterate.

And while this figure mirrors closely the illiteracy level of the general population in the U.S., we in the Justice Department are not content to allow men and women in our custody to leave prison only meeting the general norm. We are committed to giving prisoners the opportunity to better equip themselves for positive change, if they so desire.

For years in the U.S. and elsewhere, we subscribed to the "medical model," which held that prison staff could prescribe the programs that would cure an inmate of criminality.

The fact that corrections professionals now view that model as dysfunctional has not, however, removed the need to have effective motivational components to prison life and prison programs components that induce inmates to participate in what we see are critically interconnected life-skill programs such as literacy and work -- the only two mandatory programs in the Federal prison system.

In the area of literacy, inmates who do not test out at appropriate grade levels are required to attend classes -- to remedy their deficits by attending courses aimed at raising their overall literacy and educational levels.

We started this program in the early 1980s with a 6th grade literacy standard. Subsequently we moved to the 8th grade level, and very shortly, I am happy to announce today, we will be raising the standard to the high school diploma or its equivalent. Most encouraging, an increasing number of state correctional systems have adopted this model as well.

The highly positive acceptance of these literacy programs, by both the inmate population and staff, has shown this approach to be a success. Because most inmates understand the importance of literacy skills, not only in the institutional environment but also in the community, they have readily accepted our new approach. And, the program completion figures are indeed impressive:

- * Last year 10,546 inmates completed eighth grade literacy requirements.
- * 3,100 inmates completed their high school equivalency.
- * 1,781 inmates completed English as a 2nd language courses.

- * Almost 15,000 inmates were enrolled in continuing education courses
- * 7,356 inmates completed postsecondary education courses.
- * And perhaps of greatest importance, over 11,000 inmates finished occupational training programs.

From these numbers, I think you can see the kind of success we are beginning to achieve.

But success is intensely personal, not just a numerical fact. We are awarding GED diplomas to individuals who never before succeeded at anything they tried. We are graduating some prisoners as college-level scholars who couldn't read or write when they came into the institution.

We have inmates whose lives are so changed that they actually call back into the institutions just to say "hello" and encourage their former classmates. Graduates of our prison education programs are succeeding in jobs as varying as waste management plant manger, head of a news bureau, and store manager of a fast food chain.

Let me move then to our other mandatory program --, work. In our Federal prison system, we require inmates to work.

Every inmate who is able to hold a job is required to, and we employ at any given time about 30 percent of all inmates in industrial jobs.

Not only does work serve to help neutralize the adverse effects of confinement and to positively structure an inmate's time, but, we believe, it also has some important salutary benefits in terms of personal change.

Many inmates confined in our prisons have never held a steady job -- a devastating handicap in a culture that largely defines persons by their occupation and distinguishes status by job skills and achievements. For those inmates, a prison job that instills positive work habits and concrete skills may be the first step in building their self-esteem and self-confidence -- factors that may help them avoid further criminal behavior in the future.

In fact, we believe the Federal Prison Industries program that our Congress established 56 years ago is one of the most powerful tools we have, not only for the management of prisons, but for instilling positive values into prisoners.

We also believe that vocational training can be provided in prison that will significantly enhance employability, and reduce the likelihood that some offenders will return to crime because

of lack of a job. To that end, literally hundreds of trade training programs operate in Bureau of Prisons institutions throughout the nation. The foundation of these efforts, however, is basic literacy.

Work and trade training are not the entire picture, however. Today over 50 percent of all federal inmates in the U.S. are sentenced for drug-related crimes, and about 40 percent of our inmates have moderate to severe substance abuse histories.

We believe there is a straight-line relationship between literacy levels and an individual's likelihood of involvement in substance abuse. We live in a complex world, and the pressure of competition for good-paying jobs, and indeed success in virtually every aspect of modern life, hinges on literacy.

For most who cannot read, competing in the legitimate work world is impossible. And so many turn to drug abuse as an escape, or else come to rely on selling drugs to survive. Our mandatory literacy programs are coupled with high-quality drug treatment opportunities for inmates to get to the heart of substance abuse and the drug subculture -- to intervene in the forces that pull even non-users into their evil sphere of influence.

Enhanced drug and substance abuse treatment programs include three components: initial drug education, coupled with motivational efforts to induce inmates to participate in more in-depth programming; comprehensive and intensive institutional treatment programs based on the most current treatment modalities; and community-based aftercare to assure that the program gains obtained in institutional programs are not eroded.

In short, inmates who want to change are provided with the opportunity to learn personal coping strategies, to gain insight into past personal problems, substance abuse, and criminal activities, and to generally position themselves to better resist the lure of crime upon release.

And that leads me to a very critical component of a realistic model of contemporary correctional practice -- community involvement and voluntarism. It is my view, and increasingly that of many in the corrections profession, that the community needs to do more than it has in the past to accept ex-offenders and to share in the responsibility for them.

No matter how well-behaved an inmate might have been in the institution, how many programs he or she might have completed, or how well-intentioned they might be upon release, the "ex-con" label can unravel the best plans and intentions of a releasing

prisoner. Sadly, the best of prison programs are often neutralized by adverse community reaction to ex-offenders.

That is why the community in general, and members of society as individuals, need to begin to assume a greater responsibility for assisting criminal offenders. This assistance can take the form of volunteers tutoring inmates, lay religious counselors coming into prisons to work with prisoners, and members of community organizations providing services to the prison community.

Even if not counseling or tutoring, volunteers can simply visit, imparting mainstream social values to inmates, providing positive role models, and reinforcing the actions of staff as agents of change.

In this regard, I would like to tell you about a success story from my home state of Pennsylvania. A volunteer in the Dauphin County jail came up with an idea to assist those inmates who had never achieved any success whatsoever in learning to read.

Her simple plan was to ask inmates to relay a story about themselves. She started out slowly -- just a short story dictated by an inmate to the volunteer. We know that many of

those in our institutions have strong verbal skills -- they just haven't connected with words on paper.

The story was transcribed, and on her next visit, the volunteer and the inmate read it together. The material was not challenging, but was, by definition, interesting to the inmate. As this process continued over a period of time, the inmate learned to read. His own story opened up to him a world of other stories, about other people, other places, other events.

This simple idea is now being copied in other institutions across Pennsylvania. I believe it holds great potential for assisting thousands of those who have never had the joy of reading. But, it requires the help of volunteers, people who care.

Knowing that virtually every inmate will some day be released to the community, we clearly cannot afford to totally disown confined criminals. We need to establish community contact points throughout every inmate's sentence and on into release -- contact points that provide the opportunity for honest citizens to convey and reinforce mainstream social values to prisoners.

As we seek to blend these factors into a successful program for individual rehabilitation, we must do so by striking a balance between individual responsibility on the part of the offender, the need for institutions to provide program opportunities for inmates who want to change, and the imperative for the community to accept its responsibility for offenders who, after all, are still part of society.

And as we continually refine our approach to these difficult issues, I know that we in the U.S. will be looking to many of you for your ideas and suggestions, and for information on the programs and services you provide that may have applicability in our country.

Indeed, that is the real benefit of conferences such as this -- the healthy exchange of ideas and the freshening of initiatives and energies that are so important in making these important programs work.

That is why I want to offer my congratulations to the conveners of this gathering, and to the participants who have taken the time and made the effort to come to this first International Conference on Literacy and Corrections. I trust the dialogue begun this week will continue, and that we can move forward together to address these issues in all of our nations.