TOP STORY

Violence and Abuse in New York State Prisons

Recent media coverage in the New York Times, National Public Radio and the New York Post exposing horrific abuses in NYC’s Rikers Island have led to calls for reform. Likewise, instances of police brutality from the streets of Ferguson to Staten Island are shifting a national dialogue around state-inflicted, racialized violence and social control. While not currently getting similar attention, equally disturbing and violent abuses are taking place in New York State prisons.

The Correctional Association is working to shine a much-needed spotlight on these abuses, and build a campaign with others to end them. The CA recently completed in-depth investigations into three prisons—Attica, Clinton, and Greene—that have pervasive staff violence and abuse. An underlying culture and environment of abuse—not simply a few individual bad actors—drive the dehumanization and brutalization taking place. This culture is undergirded and fueled by racism, staff impunity, a lack of meaningful programs, a history of violent repression—markedly at Attica and Clinton—and a reliance on force, punishment, and disempowerment.

People incarcerated at all three prisons reported frequent, systemic, and brutal physical assaults by correction officers. Nearly all CA interviewees at Attica reported at least weekly staff beatings that could happen to any person for any reason. At Clinton, there were allegations, supported by government-issued reports, that some people had been beaten so badly that they died as a result. Particularly disturbing at Greene were reports that staff assaults reportedly were mostly directed at young people, including children aged 16 and 17. Similarly, officer intimidation is so rampant at these prisons that people at Attica walk with their heads down, prohibited from looking at baton-wielding officer. Children at Greene were even afraid to talk with the CA. Moreover, Attica and Clinton relied on excessive formal punishment, including sentencing more than 400 people at each prison in the last four years to one or more years in solitary confinement.

These abuses are an affront to humanity and the rule of law and must end. The CA is calling for the closing of Attica, the creation of effective accountability measures for abuses, and the fundamental transformation of the culture of punishment at other prisons so long as they exist. Brutality, punishment, and abuse must be replaced with transformative practices, communication, de-escalation, empowerment, healing, and mutual respect. In a recent CA publication entitled, “Voices from Attica,” incarcerated persons shared their experiences, insights, and a call for action as leaders in the movement for change. The CA has taken up that call to launch a new campaign to “Close Attica and End Violence and Abuse Across NYS Prisons.” Please visit the CA website to read “Voices,” and our reports on Clinton, Greene, and Attica. We also urge you to reach out to us at www.correctionalassociation.org/about-pvp to learn more and get involved. With the support we so greatly appreciate from you, together we can end the brutality and abuse behind the walls.
170TH ANNIVERSARY REFLECTIONS

As the Correctional Association (CA) celebrates its 170th birthday, I have been reflecting with pride and purpose on our rich and storied history. We were born amidst the social landscape in New York which at the time in 1844 was shaped in part by the relatively new status of free men and women of African descent. Founder Judge John W. Edmonds led some of New York City’s leading wealthy citizens, concerned about brutal conditions in prisons, to found the Prison Association, later renamed the Correctional Association of New York (CA). In 1846, the state passed a law granting the organization authority to inspect prisons and report its findings to the Legislature.

Why does this historical backdrop matter for the CA 170 years later?

Just as the racial dynamics at play in the mid 1800’s were central to the CA’s birth, exposing, addressing and challenging similar and unresolved racial fissures have been core elements of the CA’s mission throughout its history up to the present. Race and class disparities in the administration of criminal justice are stark in their reality and exist as a national embarrassment. Professor Michelle Alexander’s poignant expose on the role of race and class in America’s criminal justice system, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, not only served to awaken the country’s conscience to these issues and spur a growing and vibrant movement, but also engaged the moral compass of New Yorkers and spurred a growing and vibrant movement, but also moved them to take action.

As the only private organization in New York—and one of only two in the country—with unrestricted access to state prisons, the CA uses its unique mandate to promote improved prison conditions, issue comprehensive reports to policymakers and the public, and advocate for systemic policy change. Through prison monitoring, research, leadership development, coalition building, public education, policy and legislative advocacy, the CA’s three principal projects—Juvenile Justice, Prison Visiting, and Women in Prison—work to create a more fair, effective and humane criminal justice system and a safer, more just society.

The CA was founded by concerned people, just like you, our loyal supporters. The plight of those who were less fortunate and poorly treated mattered to them then, just as it matters to you today. Together, they made a difference. In partnership with you, we can do the same.

Over the years, we have evolved into a professional staff, still using, but not dependent on, volunteer monitors. Our work is supported by foundations and individual donors like you. It has been sustained by the commitment and contributions from you, our partners in building a better world.

The work of the CA is just as relevant today as it was 170 years ago. Many of you read the recent article in the New Yorker magazine which covered the three-year nightmare experienced by 16 year old Kalief Browder in the adolescent unit on Rikers Island in New York City. The sad reality is that his story is not unique. This is happening in the prisons of New York State. This is why the work of the CA is so very important.

You may have read the July piece in the New York Times—and the CA’s letter to the editor in response—about the barbaric practice of shackling pregnant women who are incarcerated, even while in labor, although there is a law banning such treatment. One of the stories shared in the piece is that of an intern working at the CA. No one should ever have to endure the torture, reproductive injustice and violations of women’s rights that she experienced. The CA fights to ensure that it comes to an end.

No human being should be buried alive in solitary confinement for months, years and decades. Those with mental illnesses should not be caged. Children should not be locked up with adults. Our prisons should not be turned into nursing homes and hospice centers. With your help, we can make a real difference and put an end to all these inhumane practices.

There is an African concept called “Sankofa”. It is depicted as a bird with its head facing backwards, holding an egg in its mouth to symbolize the reality that in order for you to know where you are going, you must understand where you have been. As we celebrate 170 years of amazing accomplishments, commitment and determination, and plan for a future of immeasurable potential, let’s hold fast to the wisdom that “Sankofa” brings with it.

Yours in celebration,
Soffiyah

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Soffiyah Elijah

WELCOME TO THE CA

DAVID BELL
David Bell is the CA’s newest Board member. He is the non-executive chair of two unique global agencies, Creative Realities and gyro—the 2014 Global Business-to-Business Agency of the Year. David was a senior advisor to Google from 2006 to 2009 and is currently a senior advisor to AOL for its comeback. We eagerly look forward to benefiting from his vast marketing and communications expertise.

JONATHAN SANDVILLE
Jonathan Sandville is the CA’s new Chief Development Officer (CDO). A seasoned executive with over 15 years’ experience, Jonathan is uniquely positioned to create new opportunities for the CA to expand its community of supporters and further develop our capacity to continue our trailblazing criminal justice reform work. His other career-path achievements include serving as the Vice President of Development and Communications with the Fortune Society, and Director and Foundation Vice President with the National Urban League.

ANISHA SABUR
Anisha Sabur is the new Project Associate for the Women in Prison Project (WIPP). A 2005 graduate from WIPP’s ReConnect program, Anisha comes to us from the Harlem Community Justice Center where she worked as a case manager and family engagement coordinator. She will focus on coordinating the Coalition for Women Prisoners, conducting community outreach, and organizing campaign advocacy activities and events.

www.correctionalassociation.org
THE CA IN ACTION

• This fall the CA was honored to partner with the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art to co-sponsor of the “States of Denial Series” at the Brooklyn Museum. The three-part event— “Attica: Then and Now,” “What’s Age Got To Do With It?” and “Unshackled: Women Speak out on Mass Incarceration and Reproductive Justice,” featured panel discussions, personal testimonials, and moving performances focused on the devastating impact of incarceration on youth, men, women and the rapidly aging prison population.

• Two widely anticipated CA reports will be released in early 2015: “Reproductive Injustice: The State of Reproductive Health Care for Women in New York State Prisons,” and a groundbreaking report on the actual impact of the youth system’s anti-discrimination policy on LGBTQ youth who have been placed in NYS’s youth justice facilities.

• The CA has been strategically applying international human rights standards to our advocacy around domestic criminal justice policy. As the U.S. is being reviewed in Geneva on its human rights record, the CA has joined with other human rights organizations to issue shadow reports exposing the true nature and impact of solitary confinement and the incarceration of youth in adult facilities on poor communities and communities of color.

• Gabrielle Horowitz-Prisco, Project Director of the CA’s Juvenile Justice Project, this month delivered an outstanding TEDx talk in Albany entitled, “On Canaries, Love and Justice.” The talk, which described the many ways in which children serve as an early warning system for societal dysfunction, addressed how our justice system fails kids and was a perfect fit for the popular TEDx platform for sharing ideas. Visit www.tedxalbany.org to view the presentation.

• Tyrell Muhammad, Project Associate in the Prison Visiting Project, was recently honored for his work by Citizens Against Recidivism. It was the third straight year that a CA staffer has been awarded such recognition.

• As a proud member of the U.S. Rights Network, the CA was a featured organization in their month-long video campaign commemorating Human Rights Day. The video features Talia DeJesus, a graduate of the CA’s Safe Passages program, which works with youth on leadership training, advocacy and community organizing. You can view the video at www.ushrn.org

• For more information on all of this work, or to read or sign up to receive our reports, visit us at www.correctionalassociation.org.

• Follow us on Facebook at Facebook.com/correctionalassociation and on Twitter @cany_1844.

IN MEMORIAM: CATHY POTLER

The Correctional Association deeply mourns the September 2014 passing of Cathy Potler, a former CA staffer. Cathy was a much-loved member of the criminal justice reform community, and while at the CA she focused on prison and jail reform, researching abuse and neglect of inmates and helping to initiate important reforms within the correctional system. Her work during the late 80’s reporting on the growing AIDS epidemic in New York prisons was critical to future work addressing that humanitarian crisis. Cathy was a caring and dedicated professional who will be missed by many. Our condolences go out to her family and friends.

TINA’S STORY

I came home in June 2012. I was released from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility with my son Blake when he was seven months old. I was lucky enough to meet Jaya and Tamar of the CA’s Women in Prison Project (WIPP) shortly after being released. We spoke about my first hand experience being shackled on my way from the prison to the hospital to give birth to my son Blake.

WIPP encouraged me to attend a meeting of the Incarcerated Mothers Committee of the Coalition for Women Prisoners and I was amazed that most of the women involved in helping with the anti-shackling law were never incarcerated. That was what made me realize how important it was for me to share my experience. When you are a number and the state has control over you it is an experience that you want to forget. I know now that I should remember that my voice could help change the future for other women in DOCCS custody.

I participated in the Spring 2014 cycle of ReConnect, the leadership development and advocacy training program run by Andrea Williams of WIPP. To say it was informative is an understatement. I now know that not every door that closes in my face (and many have) is closed permanently. There are many organizations I have networked with but I didn’t know what advocacy was until I took this class. It is something that I will continue doing for the rest of my life.

Every employment agency I went to when I came home told me they can’t help me as soon as I mentioned FELONY. Now I know I don’t have to pay for my felony conviction for the rest of my life. I am currently interning at the Correctional Association and it has been an amazing experience. I have an hour and a half commute but I love this job so much I would travel two hours each way if I had to. I have learned so much. I have done so much. Even though I am formerly incarcerated, I got to inspect conditions in the Brooklyn court pens with the CA. I feel important, and worthy of my job. I am determined. I am fighting for my life, my freedom and my future with my son, Blake.
System-involved youth make powerful advocates; their stories play a critical role in educating legislators and the public. Their voices counter stereotypes and misperceptions, as well as put a human face on policy issues that can otherwise seem distant and abstract. The Youth Speakers Institute (YSI) is a joint project of the CA, Youth Represent, and the Center for Community Alternatives, ensuring that system involved youth have access to the training they need to speak publicly and comfortably about their youth justice experiences.

Launched in the summer of 2014 with an inaugural class of nine students, youth ages 16 to 23 are trained on presentation and public speaking skills, telling one’s story, constructing a speech, and body language. The training also includes activities focused on media and trains youth speakers on effective ways of interacting with journalists and other media representatives.

Since participating in the program, YSI youth have been featured speakers on panels, have lent their voices to focus groups, and performed outreach to other potential YSI participants. Mel, a member of the YSI’s first class, said, “The focus is on speaking out. And that alone makes it different.” Mel continues: “We discussed how to voice your opinion...we went from learning about the written aspect of the justice system to actually learning how to apply our own voice into the program. I understand the kind of voice I have now. I feel so good.”

The CA is proud to be partners in this outstanding project. To learn more about The Youth Speakers Institute, contact Tanesha Ingram, Youth and Community Coordinator, at Tingram@correctionalassociation.org.