

GRATERFRIENDS

September/October 2025 Issue

September: Suicide Prevention Month

Jeffery Shockley of SCI Mercer

Suicide rates have always been higher inside prisons, and that gap is widening. Sources compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative from the Bureau of Justice Statistics do not compare death rates by sentence length, but it is hard to ignore the possibility that longer sentences are contributing to a sense of hopelessness and forcing incarcerated people into harmful situations. Not only does a longer incarceration increase the sheer probability of having a mental health crisis inside, but it also creates the conditions for these challenges to fester. People serving long sentences are often isolated and deprived of purpose.

There are some researchers who wish to argue that the prevalence of prison suicide or the threat thereof is due to mundane boredom: pervasive silence, monolithic lifestyle, and totalized identities that are closely associated with the imprisonment's twin dimensions of control and subjugation. Indeed, the rules and rituals of prison life can generate a pragmatic or fatalistic acceptance of its inalterability. The purposelessness and boredom of routine prison life takes a toll and for some an onset of suicidal ideologies can arise as early as the first time hearing the metallic slam of a cell door.

The strain of complete institutionalisation exacerbates despair, suicidal feelings, and self-injurious behaviors. Prison conduct for a time may mask deeper issues and concerns. Each person's time is their time to deal with as they deem appropriate, but reality sets in and that time feels insurmountable. With the loss of hope, suicidal ideologies can arise in various forms.

So we ask, how do we prevent suicide? Pay attention to your symptoms. A lot of inmates are prone to seasonal depression around the holidays and certain anniversaries. Watch for persistent feelings of sad-

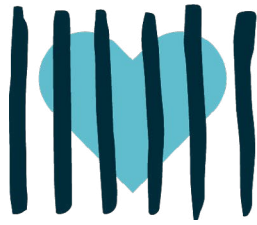
ness, hopelessness, anxiety, or emptiness. Someone may have been doing the right things, being program compliant, but can still get a parole hit. They lean into, "Nothing I do is right. Why go on? My family will be disappointed in me, again, and I did all the right things." Perhaps for years you wanted that promotion but kept getting overlooked. These disappointments can take a toll on mental health and suicide thoughts surface subtly. There is a loss of interest or pleasure in favorite activities: weight loss or gain, appetite diminished or increased, sleep habits changed, difficulty concentrating or remembering key factors. You may say, "It's just another day. Life doesn't matter, I can't be with my children or wife."

Just as there is more than one type of inmate, so are there many afflictions surrounding suicidal ideologies. Holidays are seasonal cues; an unwanted move or transfer; death of a loved one during incarceration; diagnoses of a serious or terminal illness, or the fear of being a burden to others. There is a thing called "moral injury" which is the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when the indi-

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An Overview of the PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY

Who We Are

Founded in 1787, The Pennsylvania Prison Society is the nation's oldest human rights organization. Our mission for 235 years has been to promote the health, safety, and dignity of people impacted by mass incarceration. In 1828, the Prison Society was granted access to all people in state or county custody in PA – we remain the only non-governmental organization in the United States with our level of statutory access to people in prison. Although some of our specific programs have evolved over time, we remain committed to responding to the needs of incarcerated people and their loved ones. Today, we use that access to monitor prison conditions, assist people in prison with individual issues they raise, build connections to family and community, and educate the public about the largely hidden world of prisons.

How do I contact the Prison Society?

You may write to us at 230 South Broad Street, Suite 605 Philadelphia, PA 19102. You can also have your loved ones call our family support helpline at anytime: 215-564-4775. Our team can assist to answer questions about specific facilities, policies, general issues, and concerns. Our team is small and we are not able to provide legal assistance, but we will do our best to help you get the information and resources you need. Unfortunately, at this time as an organization we are generally not able to use ConnectNetwork to correspond with people confined in SCIs.

What is Prison Monitoring?

The Prison Society is the only non-governmental organization in the country with a legal right to meet privately with any person incarcerated in their state. Each month, we receive hundreds of reports concerning access to healthcare, abuse, property, conditions of confinement, treatment, and other issues. Our trained volunteer Prison Monitors can meet with anyone incarcerated in Pennsylvania state or county prison to hear their concern in detail and engage in follow-up advocacy.

Out of respect for one's privacy and safety, we will never send a Prison Monitor without an explicit request for a visit from an incarcerated person or their loved one. During a visit, a prison monitor will meet with the person in custody one-on-one to discuss and document their situation. Following the visit, volunteers are empowered to speak with prison administration on their behalf to try to improve the situation. It is important to note that we are not lawyers and cannot assist with legal issues or casework.

What about re-entry services?

For individuals returning to the Philadelphia area, The Prison Society does have a mentoring program available designed to help ease the transition from incarceration back to communities by providing a strong social support network. We hope to expand this to other regions in the state in the future.

What happens when I share what's going on in prison?

We are grateful to the countless people in custody and their families who help promote prison transparency across the Commonwealth. Beyond working to address concerns on an individual and/or facility level, the information you provide drives our vital conversations with Pennsylvania legislators, allied organizations, and the public. As we work to educate others and engage in systemic advocacy, it is vital that this is led by the experiences and opinions of the people closest to the problem- you! Your voices directly informed our current advocacy to end the \$5 medical copay for incarcerated people, as well as our work to remove barriers to family visits.

What happens when I write to you?

We will always do our best to assist you. You can write to us to request resources, report conditions at a state or local facility, or request a prison monitor. The Prison Society is not a legal organization and can not provide specific legal advice or representation. However, our correspondence volunteers thoroughly respond to each and every letter we receive with information about other resources and organizations. We can also help you navigate different issues related to education, free books and other creative programs, reentry services, mental health resources, pen pal programs, and more.



About GRATERFRIENDS

Launched in 1981 by Joan Gauker and adopted by the Prison Society in 2002, Graterfriends is a critical outlet for incarcerated people to share their opinions and experiences. We are proud to have built a powerful community with you over these past two decades and encourage you to continue submitting to Graterfriends.

We reserve the right to edit submissions. Original submissions will not be returned. Allegations of misconduct must be documented and statistics should be supported by sources. All submissions should be no more than 500 words, or two double-spaced pages. Letters more than 200 words, or one double-spaced page, will not be published in their entirety and may be shortened for clarity and space. To protect Graterfriends from copyright infringement, please attach a note, on your submission, stating that you are the original author of the work and that you give us permission to edit and print; date and sign the declaration.

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From the Mail Room

Graterfriends accepts submissions regarding prison legislation, life, and creative endeavors. We do not accept submissions that are offensive in nature and target specific individuals. All letters must be signed for consideration. Names will be withheld from letters on rare occasions. While Graterfriends seeks to preserve the integrity of your work, we reserve the right to edit submissions as we see fit. Allegations of abuse or misconduct may be censored or omitted for your protection and safety.

....cover story continued from page 1.

vidual perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.

The challenge is to remember that you are not alone. Talk to someone, be it a mental health professional or cellmate. Find a Certified Peer Support Specialist (CPS). These are men and women who have received extensive training as well as have recovered through their own mental health issues.

I myself have attempted suicide on several occasions. I was addicted to alcohol and crack. I experienced childhood sexual abuses in an outwardly beautiful childhood in the suburbs of Philadelphia, PA. I can stand before you today not as a perfect individual but rather as someone desiring to give back to the lives that I have hurt and the pains that I have caused. I keep busy, taking my mind off of the time I have, so that others may not have to travel the path that led me here.

We prevent suicide by being attentive to each other no matter where we come from or why we are here. Each of us deserves to be loved and supported where darkness and despair tends to prevail. Take the time to listen and be attentive to those around you that may suddenly start giving things away, isolating, or acting out in a manner not displayed before. Also, importantly, do not be silent about your own struggles with depression and suicidal ideologies. We can bring life to what we say in helping another. We all have a responsibility to take seriously the impact of words, actions, and prejudices and to care for and protect those wounded by what ourselves and others have said or done. This is how we can help to prevent suicide.

Carrying the Torch

Johnnie McCollum of SCI Houtzdale

While under DOC custody, I am charged with the duty of being a source of education and encouragement. I must raise the political receptivity of those around me. I am therefore required to deconstruct myself and strip away all of my unhealthy behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, self-images, habits and anything else that I do not like about myself. I am required to make sure that my deeds and actions are symmetrical with each other and, at all times, I am accountable for those who I represent. No excuses nor justifications for coming up short will be tolerated. When I make a decision, I do not only ponder on my well being; I consider the other lives that will also be affected by this ordeal. I am because we are!

Everyday, I will seek to maximize my productivity by seeking knowledge and self-reflection. I will selflessly help someone else get closer to their goals. I will not compromise my morals nor surrender my manhood to my oppressors at any cost. I will always be positioned mentally and spiritually to handle my oppressors more effectively than they can handle me. I will not quiet my voice nor stand down in this battle.

I was brought in by some clear-sighted elders who took the liberation of their people seriously and sacrificed their lives in protecting them. I was raised by these men for the most part and was blessed enough to acquire some of their lifelong lessons. One particular thing that I took from them was that seeking knowledge and standing up for your people is necessary. That's what a real G do. He knows where he stands, what he stands for, and won't allow you to trick him off his pivot.

This knowledge radically altered my perception of prison. Instead of looking at it like a bid, it is more of a university where I can gain different tools, rebuild

myself, and return back to society with something to offer to not only my family and community but also the world. I find myself being sought for help from youngsters and old heads. Through this help, I shed light on what was passed down to me and how we can expand the platform of those who came before us.

Carrying the torch comes with responsibilities and duties that must not be shirked no matter what.

Faith and Redemption

Kevin Dowling of SCI Phoenix

Soon, I will mark 28 years in prison. I have been blessed with many Christian friends in America and overseas. Some I've corresponded with for 20 years or more. Several have passed away and await Judgement Day.

I was a 39-year-old family man when I lost my freedom. I was happily married for nearly 13 years and the proud father of two daughters (12 and 9 years old) and one son (23 months). I am the son of parents who endured the Great Depression, parents who were part of what was once called, "The Working Poor." That famous Irish grit and Scot-Irish work ethic is deeply infused in my blood. I was blessed with leadership skills and entrusted with running larger operations for 20 years. I was an investigator, security director, and operations manager. I sometimes risked my life to protect clients, employees, and customers. I loved mentoring and encouraging my employees to maximize their potential.

My faith has been tested through a crucible of inconceivable events. In 1997, I was arrested and imprisoned. In 1998, convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death. Until 2018, death row involved total confinement for 22 hours daily, with two hours outside in just a kennel-type cage. After winning a class-action lawsuit, we were granted full inmate privileges including prison jobs. It was a blessing to start work for the chaplain's office, then pushing others in wheelchairs, and now cleaning dayrooms and showers.

In 2022, the judge assigned to my appeal vacated my murder conviction and death sentence. The police had fabricated evidence and testimony, the sole eyewitness to me outside the murder scene had

lied, and the prosecutors had concealed exculpatory evidence. I was sent to county prison as a pre-trial detainee. Then, the State Attorney General, who was running for governor, appealed the judge's ruling. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned my victory, saying I needed more proof of my innocence! I returned to death row after 27 months in limbo.

In June, I turned 67 years old. God willing, I hope to win my freedom before I die. I yearn to attend an actual church again and volunteer in the community. I'd like to see and smell the ocean, to take a walk in the woods and see God's creatures, and to see the sun rise and set. I hope to visit my beloved mother's grave with my sister, who has stood by me all these years. I hope my adult children will want to reconcile with me, before I am gone.

My burial is planned at a small church cemetery in a plot offered by my godfather, who will soon turn 88 years old. I am at peace with my Lord and Savior, who sent his only son into this world as the Son of Man to die as an expiator for our sins. As the Irish are fond of saying, "I will wear the wooden coat to the resurrection."

Reality Check

Jamie Williams of SCI Houtzdale

In my life, I observed I was questioning or fighting reality. But, the reality is that I am incarcerated for trying to hurt my then wife/now ex-wife who I still love after 6 years in prison.

I reminded myself that reality is what it is. Although I filed for post conviction collateral relief in the Court of Common Pleas, my case may still not get overturned.

I also considered the reality and nonjudgementally accepted that because I actually did it using my hands- it happened.

I practiced accepting reality with my whole being, mind, body, soul and spirit. I must do this in order to live a better life and not make the same mistakes again.

I coped with events that seemed unacceptable, using pros and cons of accepting versus denying and rejecting reality.

I allowed myself to experience disappointment, sadness and grief. But, I now understand the person I am, and I have acknowledged that life can be worth living, even when there is pain.

Changing Values

Jafar Saidi of SCI Somerset

Changing values among prisoners, staff, and the public has put prisons on a frightening collision course. Many younger officers were raised on Sylvester Stallone movies. They view prisoners as scum for whom incarceration itself isn't sufficient punishment. While the John Wayne movies of an earlier generation were also reactionary, there was at least some pretense that the "good guys" played fair. The action films today use only an initial definition of "good" (cops) and "bad" (criminals) as the thinnest veneer to justify the hero's use of the most vicious and criminal forms of violence.

Underpinning the venomous definitions for "good" and "bad" is racism: the basic foundation rock of this society. Eighty percent of Pennsylvania's state prisoners are Black and Latino, while the staff is overwhelmingly white. Many problems that characterize the most repressive prisons--like limitations to three showers a week, the obstacles to prisoner initiated programs, or the absence of any semblance of job or family responsibility--seem to make sense only as an effort to shape prisoners into the "animals" that we're accused of being.

The pettiness and arbitrariness in the state prisons can drive you crazy. In one prison, it's fine to have your shirt tails out, but you damned well better have your jacket buttoned up. In the next prison, you can have your jacket unbuttoned, but don't dare have your shirt tails out. At still another: you'll get yelled at because you didn't take your hat off before coming inside.

As dull and routine as prison life can be, it's still impossible to have any reliable schedule or work plan. Times and procedures are shifted without notice and for no apparent reason. The incessant message to us prisoners is that we have no control over even the most minute aspect of our lives. Everything we do is dependent on the decision, or the whim, of those in authority.

The question of changing values among prisoners first requires a demystification of the people involved. Prisoners are neither "animals" nor the "noble oppressed." There's a wide range of immediate causes for incarceration, though there is a generalization that does apply: prisoners overwhelmingly come from the oppressed sectors of the population.

Still, most criminals hold the predominant values of capitalism--about making money and being self-centered--but apply them to their own socioeconomic situation.

In describing how the change in values is expressed concretely, you must allow for this old-timer's tendency to romanticize the "good old days." It's clear that significant changes have occurred over the past 30 years. For example, if guards pulled a prisoner out of the line in the 1970s, the whole line would stop to make sure it didn't become anything more than a frisk. Today, the line will move on as ordered. Or, simply in terms of sense of community, today it's much more common for prisoners to talk loudly. Most of these loud conversations lack a constructive purpose and instead concern matters such as abusing women, which the old-time convict would have at least found embarrassing to broadcast.

Although snitching has always been a problem, its prevalence has reached a new level. There was a fairly workable prisoner organizing grapevine in the 60s and 70s. Today, it seems that anything discussed by more than five prisoners will be immediately known to the administration. The current perception among prison activists is that any effort to develop effective and positive programs will be broken up before they get started. Yet, while positive organizing seems impossible, the spontaneous responses to prisoners (given the changes in values) in any crisis are very unpredictable and likely to be negative. All in all, it appears that the changing values of prisoners create greater potential for fruitless violence and offer less prospect for social change.

An aware and concerned public is the main hope for avoiding the collision course within the prisons. Here again, however, values have changed for the worse. With the resurgence of open racism and the added frustration with the failure of liberal rhetoric, the broader public doesn't give a damn about prisoners and appear to support calls for harsher punishment. If the Attica Rebellion were to happen today, I believe that the defining public reaction would not be "how could conditions get so bad?" but rather "why didn't the state kill more of them?" The public's vindictive attitude, cultivated by politicians and the media, goes to the point of irrationality even in terms of the limited goals of curtailing street crime and tax costs.

There has been an escalation of the dismally failed strategy of repression throughout the past

30 years. As a result, many more young people have been forced through a system that's mainly conducive to producing ex-convicts who are angrier and more violent than before they entered prison. At the same time, as the public is moving in a reactionary direction, there is now almost no progressive outside movement or activity focusing on prisons.

Those striving for a more humane society need to relate to prison issues not only because the conditions and terms are unjust but also because they are left unattended. Prison issues could become key assets for politicians who need scapegoats in times of crisis. This plea isn't a parochial call to rank prisons over other burning issues of the day: war and interventions, racist violence, AIDs, rising violence against women and children, and economic dislocation. Yet, it is a call to recognize that the situation in American prisons is a significant piece in the whole picture and an important place to raise the challenge: who are the real criminals, and what are humane terms for successfully responding to the crisis and dislocation in this society?

Serendipity

Carol Hann of SCI Muncy

By definition, serendipity means, "the faculty of making fortunate and unexpected discoveries by accident; a surprising turn of events that you did not expect to happen."

This word has been with me lately as I read the news. Those diagnosed with pancreatic cancer are usually given two years to live and even less without care. However, there has been a medical breakthrough that may prove a cure for this deadly cancer. There are so many medical breakthroughs. Surprisingly enough, pigs, who are described as harboring evil legions (spirits) in the Bible, could now save humanity because of the possibility of using their organs as transplants. That is serendipity.

A homeless person spends his last dollar on a lottery ticket worth a billion dollars and wins. Or, he goes to a thrift store to look around for neat junk and spots an old Beatles record for \$1.99. He goes home and finds out that it is worth ten grand. Or, out of the thousands of inmates who put in petitions for Compassionate Release, you are the only one who is picked.

A wrongful conviction can ruin a person's life, but God's plan is to humble that person so that they can use the situation to create awareness for everyone in society. They can stop corruption and be the one who steps up. In the future, the innocent will be freed and the guilty will be the ones rotting in prisons. That would be serendipity.

Justice Delayed is Justice Denied

Timothy X. Wright of SCI Mahanoy

When I became a student in the study of the law, the number one point my teacher, Robert Hall, stressed to me was this: "It doesn't matter if you are guilty or innocent once you have been convicted, sentenced, and sent to prison. The appellant judges are only concerned with one thing when your case comes before them, and that is whether your conviction was a result of your constitutional rights being violated."

I never forgot, or forget, his words when I study the law. I say that because Rodney Wells, Ford Howard, Craig Murphy, Esau Burroughs, Berry Jones, and Aaron Fox are men who bring this to mind. The egregious conduct and behavior of the prosecutor in their cases is well documented. How can one whose job is to uphold the law be able to systematically break the law without any kind of repercussions? Where is the justice in that? The above-named men along with Damon Jones are men whose convictions were sought based exclusively on the bias and mean spirit of a prosecutor who bragged about how many men he put on death row and who received life sentences. Every day the above men spend in prison is a blight on the justice system in which they were convicted. I speak on their behalf because these are men I do personally know and who have subsequently spent forty years or more in prison, all because the prosecutor was hell-bent on winning a case regardless of how it was done. The prosecutor didn't care if he had to threaten witnesses with losing their children or receiving jail time if they didn't cooperate, or even if he had to outright lie. The sad part is that it was allowed to happen under the watchful eyes of the District Attorney at the time. Prison reformists, law advocates, and legal innocence theorists should be appalled that these men I mentioned are still incarcerated and

have been for four decades or more.

American citizens' constitutional rights are the bedrock of our democracy and should never be trampled on if justice is to be the result of men being tried under the law of the land. The Integrity Crime Unit under Mr. Krasner, the District Attorney in Philadelphia, was set up for men just like those I have mentioned. Not only should their cases be reviewed immediately, but they should be released after one studies how they were convicted in the first place. The United States Constitution guarantees the right to a fair trial. Not only were these trials unfair; they were a result of the most blatant disrespect of the law possible. My point is simple: every one of us should be appalled that these men are still behind bars while they are being convicted by the very law that is supposed to protect us from such tyranny. I actually wrote the District Attorney of Philadelphia on all their behalf and expressed to him that these men are the reason the ICU (Integrity Crime Unit) was created in the first place. I know there are many more men like them behind these walls, but I know these men and the good their presence in the community can do to help curb the violence plaguing our young men and women. It's time to let them go, as justice delayed is surely justice denied.

Duality of Justice and Pardons

Wayne Thomas of SCI Albion

On November 27, 2025, I will be 67 years old. My Board of Pardon's vote has been pending since 2020 and it's taking a terrible toll on me, driving me through bouts of anxiety awaiting their decision.

I worry about finding someone who recognizes the inhumanity of what I've gone through. In 35 years of incarceration, my medical condition has deteriorated. I have hypertension, high cholesterol, asthma, and diabetes. Occasionally, my high blood pressure gets worse and I am so lightheaded I have to sleep on the floor. I take pills to lower my risk for a stroke, heart attack, and the conditions of my kidney and pancreas diseases.

Studies show that taxpayers spend an average of \$29,000 each year per youth offender (ages 18-25). Prisoners ages 50 and up account for 254 million dol-

lars in health care costs. In two more years, I will cost the state another \$65,000 per year--a huge cost to taxpayers for a man whose elderly age clearly shows he is not a threat to society anymore.

Do I expect any of you to care? You should. Over 1400 rioters declared war on the Capitol and they are scheduled to receive presidential pardons, leading others down a path of insurrection and bloody assaults. In my case, the Board of Pardons' four year delay is frustrating. Other deserving people had pardon applicants in Pennsylvania like Maroon Russel Shoatz and Bruce Norris. Both were kept in limbo, awaiting the Board's decision about a release from prison. They died in prison. The system continues to erode.

Behind These Walls, the Public is Blind

Graham Roman of SCI Rockview

Iwrite you as an individual who suffers from lifelong physical and mental health conditions, which have caused great pain and struggle throughout my life. I am diagnosed with a rare bone disorder called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, a.k.a. "brittle bone disease."

In my 35 years of life, I have at least 27 recorded broken bones. The PADOC/SCI Rockview refuses to acknowledge my medical records starting from DuPont Children's Hospital where I was diagnosed and treated in childhood.

Where is the humane treatment for 2300 men housed at SCI Rockview? How can this death trap of a prison stay open?

This letter is being sent to 50 different news, radio, and newspaper reporters; will you be the first to respond and ask the needed questions?

Ask them:

- Are they investigating the multiple suicides in less than one year?
- Why are men being refused access to mental health care and CPS workers?
- Why are men being retaliated against for filing grievances to staff?
- Why do they deny hundreds of grievances weekly without investigating legit claims of abuse, assaults, beatings, thefts, and access to medical care complaints?

- How are 400 men being housed still on D/A block with a major ongoing pigeon infestation and leaking roofs, causing the dayroom to flood?

SCI Rockview must be held accountable for the conditions. Where is the humane treatment for 2300 men housed at SCI Rockview? How can you even question keeping this death trap of a prison open?

Dereliction and Tyranny

Khalil Hammond of SCI Phoenix

I often hear people say the system is “broken,” but I don’t think that it is. I believe that it operates exactly how it was intended to: which is to “frustrate,” “humiliate,” “dehumanize,” and “break” the human beings encapsulated within it as a means to deter societal onlookers from rebelling against it. In a majority politically-unconscious society of “laws” and “order,” this “system” seems to serve a harsh but necessary purpose.

However, if some digging was done, it would be realized that the state of our current system is having an overall detrimental impact on our society! Many studies, reports, and analysts of the criminal justice system have found that poverty, a lack of education, broken family bonds, and a lack of employment or employment opportunities are the leading causes for why people turn to criminal activity.

If these are where the biggest problems stem, and rehabilitation is the goal/agenda behind prisons, then why aren’t solutions to these issues the focal point of local governments or officials employed to maintain the prisons?

The simple and most logical answer is that those in charge of and employed by “the system” benefit from it operating to a tune of organized chaos and confusion! Basically, rehabilitation is not the goal!

As the recidivism rate fluctuates, it never significantly decreases—this should be an indication that the current mode of operations isn’t working for the (alleged) agenda. One of the biggest issues I see is that there is no real oversight coming from outside of these prisons to keep employees honest about what’s happening inside of them. This is why (on occasion) employees are able to sexually and/or physically assault prisoners, steal from prisoners, kill prisoners, harass and/or antagonize prisoners through depriva-

tions and hostile interactions, and then falsely report what occurs—with impunity.

This doesn’t teach the inmate populace how to become productive members of society—hence the recidivism rate! What should be alarming to those in society is that the majority of those subjected to these systematic oppressions for years will be returning to society, one day, worse than when they came to prison.

Some may view this as a choice, without completely understanding the psychological effects of long-term incarceration or the inhumane conditioning of the incarcerated.

However, without a proposed solution, we are doomed to perpetually continue the current disastrous cycle. As a start to creating a solution for these institutional issues within the system, I propose that our society push our elected officials to establish a prison oversight board and require all prison guards to wear body cameras. There has to be checks and balances!

In Memory of Edward (Blink) Printup

John Payne of SCI Huntingdon

With a heavy and sad heart, I regret to tell friends of Edward Printup that he passed Sunday, March 16, 2025. Ed always told me, after 45 years plus incarceration there is someone in every institution that knows us. My condolences to those of you who share this loss with me.

He saw Huntingdon as a community, one of which he tried endlessly to improve. Over the years he was: one of the founding fathers of the Native American Circle; Trustee for the Jay Cee’s

Board; Treasurer for the Pennsylvania Lifer’s Association, Vice President of Veterans Behind the Wall. And was the Current President of Veterans Behind the Wall.

His passing will leave an aching void to all who knew him. May he rest in peace.

From the Society

Healthy Relationships after Reentry

David Meade, Pennsylvania Prison Society

Since coming home, I have realized how important it is to build healthy relationships with family, friends, and significant others while incarcerated. This is very important because there is nothing like a sturdy support group upon release.

The truth is that while you are incarcerated doing time, people change, laws change, and you yourself have changed. When you get home, most of the people that you were once very close to can feel different in multiple ways.

You yourself may have grown mentally to the extent that you now have boundaries to not accept the things that you once dealt with before incarceration. Have you ever heard the term “Grow with me or grow away from me?” I value these words because after I got released after doing 10 years, I found out that I outgrew a lot of friends and family members. I still love them unconditionally but from a distance. Negative influences from the outside world can lead to temptation, further struggles, or even a return to incarceration. Recognizing the importance of healthy relationships and surrounding oneself with supportive individuals is vital for anyone dealing with the repercussions of incarceration, and no human being is worth jeopardizing your freedom.

Be certain that the people in your life support you and will not exploit your vulnerability of being on parole. I’ve seen people get back into unhealthy romantic relationships. Tempers flare which can lead to false accusations, particularly related to domestic disputes. People motivated by jealousy or resentment may resort to making unfounded claims to manipulate or harm others. False accusations can lead to severe consequences, including the revocation of parole or further imprisonment. Such scenarios underscore the necessity for those incarcerated to remain vigilant and to build relationships based on trust, respect, and mutual support. Remember to keep your cool and to end relationships that have unhealthy patterns. You control who you surround yourself with and how you

act with them.

Upon my release I have seen countless men and women go back to prison for parole violations due to having friendships and relationships with the wrong people so be mindful and conscious of your support system and immediately recognize those who don’t have your best interest upon reintegration.

Writing Contest

David Meade, Pennsylvania Prison Society

Each year, the Prison Society will publish a new writing prompt, and we will publish select submissions in upcoming issues. We hope to inspire you to write about new topics and to reflect creatively on different themes. At the end of the year, we will announce our three favorite submissions and will send certificates to the winners.

2025’s prompt: Serendipity. Serendipity is a noun and means good luck in making unexpected and fortunate discoveries. It’s a fluke, good fortune, or a stroke of luck. According to [vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/serendipity), the word ‘serendipity’ was first used by a British nobleman in the mid 1700s in a fairy tale to refer to characters who were always making discoveries through chance. You can thank serendipity if you find a pencil at an empty desk just as you walk into an exam and realize that you forgot yours; or if you meet the right person at the right time in your life.

Write to us and tell us what serendipity means to you. Have you experienced it? Both fictional and nonfiction submissions are welcome! (And of course, please feel free to submit content not related to this prompt for publication! This is just a new feature.)

Visit with SCI Dallas Lifers

Leigh Owens, *Pennsylvania Prison Society*

It was recently my pleasure to attend SCI Dallas' Lifers banquet, which highlighted the great work that they are doing while being in an impossibly difficult situation. They are proof that who we are is much deeper than the worst mistake we've ever made, and although society might define you by where you live, your work transcends your confinement.

Seeing the joy and love in the room as everyone spent time with friends and families was invaluable. I know that extended visits give something powerful to hold onto. More than 20 years later, I still vividly remember the hours I spent with my girlfriend and family during a program event while I was at Rikers Island. The hardest moment was saying goodbye, but the love and connection shared during that visit has stayed with me. It was an honor to be a part of your banquet.

Many Lifers mentioned meaningful stories and reflections of the event to share. We invite you to submit a written piece for Graterfriends. The Prison Society is committed to addressing the many challenges you face each day. We want to keep the lines of communication open and encourage you to stay in touch—sharing updates on events, facility conditions, and anything else you believe might help us in our shared mission. Please remember that you are valued, and your life matters.

We thank you for your work and your dedication to service, despite the many challenges you face.



From left to right: Leigh Owens (*Pennsylvania Prison Society*), Yvonne Newkirk (*Prison Monitor Volunteer*), Connor Demchick (*Pennsylvania Prison Society*), Joseph Eaddy (*SCI Dallas Lifer's Association*), Etta Cetera (*Let's Get Free*), Basym Hasan, (*Prison Monitor Volunteer*).

Prison Society Honors John Topper as Incarcerated Person of the Year

“I won't settle for just fighting for myself.” John Topper can't speak, but he is far from silent.

Although Huntington's Disease robbed John of his ability to communicate vocally, it hasn't stopped him from advocating for the many disabled people in Pennsylvania's prisons.

That's why the Prison Society was proud to honor John as Incarcerated Person of the Year at the Society's annual Love Above Bars celebration on September 17 at Philadelphia's Triple Bottom Brewing.

“John is one of the most caring people,” said Jessica Reed, the Prison Society's prison monitoring manager in Central Pennsylvania. “From the time that he went to prison, he has strived to help others.

“Before John received the devastating diagnosis of Huntington's Disease, he found purpose in working in the special needs unit to help [incarcerated people] who needed assistance,” she said. “John is not just fighting for himself; he is also fighting for all of those who have disability needs within the prison system.”

In 2018, after a year in prison, John's health began to decline, and he was later diagnosed with Huntington's Disease — a degenerative disease that causes the brain to decay over time. John will first be eligible for parole in 2032, but he has applied to have his sentence shortened so that he can be transferred to a nursing home better able to meet his physical needs.

As you read this, you'll see that John's words are quoted. He has a special device, an UbiDuo, that allows him to type his words, which the device then reads aloud so he can communicate both audibly and by writing. That device is at the heart of his advocacy, but more about that later.

John's story starts in York, with a rough childhood, addicted parents, and time spent in foster homes. Addiction also captured him, mistakes followed, and he entered prison, most recently in 2017.

As part of his sentence, John got clean through prison drug rehabilitation programs. They inspired him to become a peer support specialist and cancer caregiver.

“I was busy from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., taking guys to different places, cleaning their cells, cleaning up ac-

cidents, both from bodily functions and from spills,” John wrote in a clemency petition.

“I would get the guys into the showers, talk to guys that needed to be calmed down, intervene sometimes and mediate sometimes, cook and feed guys who were unable to do so themselves, get them clean clothes and get the dirty ones washed. I barely had time for myself or my own needs, it seemed. The time flew by. I loved it.

“What goes around comes around,” John wrote.

“Because of my Huntington’s, I am in a wheelchair and have lost the use of my voice,” he wrote. “Now I have a Certified Peer Support worker taking care of me. I could not survive without the help of these caregivers.”

John’s support work in prison amplified a lifelong impulse to help others — a desire that sharpened as the disease took hold.

“It’s really made me take steps back in my life to evaluate what got me here and start to do things to overcome that and become a better person who is prepared for society,” he wrote.

In 2018, as he began to lose his ability to speak, John couldn’t respond to orders from corrections officers and was sometimes disciplined. He couldn’t ask for a toothbrush, report that his toilet was clogged, request a shower, his eyeglasses, or warmer clothes. He couldn’t access programs or work on legal matters.

Prison-permitted entertainment tablets helped him communicate, but they could only be used in his cell, didn’t work well, and frequently broke. Officials provided a laminated card printed with the alphabet, but didn’t have the patience for him to spell out his needs letter by letter.

He became so frustrated that he attempted suicide.

And then he decided to fight — for himself and for all the disabled people in prison.

He focused his fight on communication, including adaptive devices like the UbiDuo. For John, and others in the same situation, reliable access to reliable communication matters.

In February, with the help of the Prison Society and its allies — the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project and Disability Rights Pennsylvania — John, then housed at SCI Forest, filed a federal lawsuit against Pennsylvania’s Department of Corrections (DOC).

“The Prison Society has been great in all this

since I first reached out to them in 2022. They have advocated for me every step of the way — supported me with my stance to better things for incarcerated individuals with disabilities,” wrote John, now incarcerated at SCI Mahanoy.

By law, incarcerated individuals with disabilities are entitled to the rights, protections, and accommodations of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

U.S. District Judge Phillip J. Caraballo soon ordered the DOC to give John an effective communication device for his personal use. That ruling resolved some of John’s immediate needs, and he could have easily decided to drop the case.

But he didn’t.

“I have been through so much over the past six years, I feel like I am able to continue to face the challenges ahead to continue to accomplish this goal that will one day benefit all individuals in need that are incarcerated in Pennsylvania,” John wrote.

As a practical matter, John worries that the prison could stop providing his current accommodations and not give him access to other accommodations he needs, including a phone that would allow him to have “a real conversation with my Mom.”

“More importantly, if I pull out and not win my lawsuit, it won’t become precedent so other disabled people in here can use it to get the things they need,” John wrote. “If I give up because it is hard, then I’ve done nothing to help other disabled individuals.

“I won’t settle for just fighting for myself.”



Photo of John Topper, Pennsylvania Prison Society’s Incarcerated Person of the Year 2025



Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM) is grateful to have facilitated recent workshops on advocacy through storytelling and submitting feedback on legislation with amazing groups of people living in a number of Pennsylvania's state prisons! If you or an organization you're a part of are interested in FAMM facilitating advocacy workshops in your facility, please contact us at FAMM (Attn: Advocacy), 1100 13th St. NW, Suite 201, Washington, D.C. 20005. We are excited to advocate for much-needed change alongside you and your loved ones!

HOUSE BILLS SUPPORTED BY FAMM

- **HB 150** (Rep. Krajewski (D) & Rep. Ecker (R)) would expand Pennsylvania's existing medical release program to allow incarcerated people with serious chronic or terminal illnesses to petition the court for a modification of sentence.
- **HB 443** (Rep. Briggs (D)) would eliminate the life without the possibility of parole sentencing requirement for second-degree "felony" murder convictions and instead set the sentence at not more than 50 years for people convicted over age 18. HB 443 would also allow parole eligibility after 25 years served.
- **HB 458** (Rep. Hill-Evans (D)) Would allow veterans a chance to change their conviction if they have a mental health condition from their military service that wasn't considered in their original trial.
- **HB 1042** (Rep., N. Nelson (D)) would give some incarcerated people the chance to shorten their sentences by joining education or job training programs but some types of sentences wouldn't qualify.
- **HB 1506** (Rep. Carroll (D)) would prohibit fees and charges for communication services for incarcerated people.
- **HR 36** (Rep. Powell (D)) would direct the Joint State Government Commission to conduct a survey on prison libraries in Pennsylvania, looking at the adequacy of book and media collections, the services provided, the number of books and media provided, and general accessibility.
- **HR 59** (Rep. Kazeem (D)) would make November 1, 2025 "State Correctional Institution Day" in Pennsylvania to raise awareness of the need to monitor and continue to improve conditions in our prisons and that everyone is treated humanely. It also would encourage representatives to visit a correctional institution at least two times a year without notice.
- **HR 189** (Rep. Cepeda-Freytiz (D)) would direct the Joint State Government Commission to study SCIs' nutritional value of food and incarcerated individuals' health conditions. The commission would also study the medical and physical health of incarcerated individuals, as well as the prevalence of illness and disease among incarcerated individuals. This study would be used to make legislative recommendations to improve the nutrition and health of incarcerated individuals in SCI facilities.

SENATE BILLS SUPPORTED BY FAMM

- **SB 135** (Sen. Street (D)) eliminates the mandatory life without parole sentencing requirement for first- and second-degree murder. This bill sets parole eligibility in the following way: 25 years for those convicted of Second-Degree Murder, and 35 years for those convicted of first-degree murder. There is an exemption for anyone who is

convicted of murdering a law enforcement officer, who will continue to receive a life without parole sentence. The bill also creates the State Office of Re-Entry Programs within the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency (PCCD).

- **SB 136** (Sen. Street (D)) would allow medical parole for individuals who function minimally in a correctional institution due to any of these: (i) A terminal illness. (ii) A chronic and debilitating physical or medical condition or disease. (iii) A serious functional or cognitive impairment. (iv) Deteriorating physical or mental health due to the aging process. It would also allow medical parole if a public or disaster emergency related to health is declared or a contagious disease outbreak occurs in a department facility which the facility is unable to contain or from which the facility cannot protect vulnerable individuals. It would also establish parole eligibility for people who are age 55+ and have served 25+ years or half the minimum term of their sentence.
- **SB 231** (Sen. Cappelletti (D)) would require state prisons and county jails to provide voice and video communication services free of charge to incarcerated persons initiating or receiving communications.
- **SB 387** (Sen. Bartolotta (R) & Sen. Street (D)) eliminates the mandatory life without parole sentencing requirement for second degree felony murder convictions and instead sets the penalty at 25 years to life with parole eligibility at 25 years.
- **SB 740** (Sen. Bartolotta (R)) would eliminate medical co-pays for incarcerated people.

HOUSE BILLS OPPOSED BY FAMM

- **HB 57** (Rep. M. Brown (R)) would create mandatory minimum sentences for people convicted of certain fentanyl-related offenses.
- **HB 641** (Rep. Munroe (D)) would require that those serving sentences for a second or more violent offense would need to serve 70 percent of their maximum sentence before being eligible for parole.

SENATE BILLS OPPOSED BY FAMM

- **SB 92** (Sen. Mastriano (R)) "Tyler's Law" would establish a 25 year mandatory minimum sentence for a conviction for selling or engaging to distribute fentanyl that results in a death. This mandatory minimum penalty would not apply to drug users who share drugs with friends or family members or those who seek medical help for individuals who overdose.

REQUESTS FOR RESOURCES

In lieu of a list, please request resources directly with this form. Please allow one month for a response.

Complete and mail to the Pennsylvania Prison Society:

Pennsylvania Prison Society
ATTN: Resources
230 South Broad Street, Suite 605
Philadelphia, PA, 19102

Name, ID Number, Facility
If Applicable: Returning County for Re-entry Resources

Resource Description
Note: The Prison Society does not offer financial assistance

Submissions Timeline Update

In order for our team to put together Graterfriends and get it out to all the facilities within the months of the submission (for example- getting May/June to you during the months of May or June), we work on a very advanced timeframe.

On average, submissions that are to appear in an issue will appear 6 months after the time they are received by our office.

Thank you for your patience- Graterfriends is a majority volunteer-run newsletter and we strive to be as timely and current as possible.

READER SURVEY

We welcome comments and suggestions from all readers.
Please complete this form and mail it to the Pennsylvania
Prison Society.

Pennsylvania Prison Society
ATTN: Resources
230 South Broad Street, Suite 605
Philadelphia, PA, 19102

Name, ID Number, Facility

Comments and Suggestions

Buses Are Back.



Starting October 2025, we will provide rides for your loved ones from Philadelphia to four state correctional institutions: **SCI Benner, SCI Frackville, SCI Mahanoy, and SCI Muncy.**

Tell your loved ones to purchase tickets one of two ways:

- **Online:** Visit www.prisonsociety.org/services/transportation
- **In-person:** 230 S. Broad Street, Suite 605, Philadelphia, PA 19102 (Monday - Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM)
- **Call** our office at 215-564-4775.

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