

# MARYLAND CURE

Maryland CURE  
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## Hospice Behind Bars

by Larry Bratt

The Washington Post, March 17, 2013

Metro Opinion Page

Over the past two years, dozens of Maryland prisoners have died at the hospital on the grounds of the former Maryland House of Correction in Jessup. The causes of death ranged from cancer to heart, liver and renal diseases to hepatitis to simple wear and tear on bodies damaged by decades of alcohol and drug abuse. Maladies, in other words, that warranted hospice care.

But these men died scared and alone. No friends or family could sit vigil with them; no hospice volunteers offered them comfort. Granted, these men committed crimes against the people of Maryland, so they were where they were as a result of their own actions. But American justice forbids cruel punishment. It is cruel to make a man face death alone. Staff members who know my concern for these men occasionally allow me to visit them. I have witnessed their fear.

Lonnie, who served nearly 30 years for murder, lay dying of cancer. His despair over what he perceived to be his abandonment by his family and fellow prisoners made him all the more pitiful. "I'm scared of dying," he said. "I'm all alone and afraid. . . . I don't understand."

Charlie, a friend of 28 years, became confused, telling me that his relatives had never visited, even though a prison clergyman said they had been there recently when he celebrated a Mass for the family. Ten days later, Charlie died without anyone at his bedside.

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Saddest for me was Willie, a fellow lifer (I'm serving two life sentences for homicide) with more than 25 years in. He and I shared a ward at the hospital while I was there for knee surgery and a hip replacement. Cancer was rapidly killing him. Bewildered as a lost child, this former boxer nonetheless fought for life, but his body failed. After succumbing to dementia, he was transferred to an outside facility.

Before his transfer, I sat holding Willie's hand. I let him know I loved him and that he was deeply respected by many. "I'm not afraid to die," he said, "I'm just scared of the loneliness." But he died alone, handcuffed to a bed in accordance with a state policy for outside hospitals that makes no exception for the dying.

Willie's words led me to action. I proposed to Jessup Correctional Institution Warden John Wolfe, a progressive penologist by Maryland standards, that his institution establish a prison hospice. To bring this about, Maryland need only follow the lead of Burl Cain, the warden at the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. In the 1990s, Cain read in the newspaper about hospice and knew that his thousands of lifers would benefit. Angola's hospice unit opened in 1998, and two years later the prison was honored for the program with the American Hospital Association's Circle of Life Award.

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## What We Have Done for You Advocacy Efforts on your behalf

Maryland CURE President Lea Green ALWAYS has a busy month advocating for prison reform! Although we can't list every meeting, conference or advocacy action she takes, we highlight them here for each newsletter.

- Challenges Faced by Formerly Incarcerated Parents at Coppin State University. Lea attended this community forum to examine the Maryland child support system. Listen to her interview at <http://gbgcjn.wordpress.com/>
- Job Opportunities Task Force in support of suspending child support payments while incarcerated. Passed in MD last year.
- Passing of 'Ban the Box' in Annapolis has made Maryland the 9<sup>th</sup> state to remove questions about criminal history from job applications which postpones questions about criminal history until later in the hiring process
- Caryn York of Job Opportunities Task Force spoke. [www.jotf.org](http://www.jotf.org)
- Hon Jill Carter spoke on topic of equal parenting and joint custody
- Tools to Navigate the system moderated by Greg Carpenter
- Vernon Wallace of Center for Urban Families
- Official launch of Isaiah 61 ministry to provide faith based mentoring and transition services for returning citizens to reenter the community. More information soon!

### Aging Prisoners

American prisons are home to a growing geriatric population, with one-third of all inmates expected to be over 50 by next year. As courts have handed down longer sentences and tightened parole, about 75 prisons have started hospice programs, half of them using inmate volunteers and we hope Maryland will eventually be a part of this movement.

Older prisoners are also the fastest growing segment of the U.S. prison population. Besides establishing a Hospice, some states, like Louisiana, have passed laws making it easier for some elderly prisoners to be released after a parole hearing at which their risk for committing future crimes is assessed. Releasing some older prisoners early could shift the cost of their care from states to their family members, and make them eligible for federal programs like Medicaid, experts say.

## The Peace Initiative

*A state-wide campaign and effort spear-headed by the Extra Legalese Group Inc. (ELG) to prevent victimization, remediate youth and gang violence, and to develop and invest resources throughout local communities to ensure that Maryland's youth become productive citizens of this state.*

The Extra Legalese Group will host their 3<sup>rd</sup> Peace Initiative July 23, 24 and 25 at JCI in Jessup Maryland. Attendees should have already submitted their information to JCI but more information can be found at [www.marylandcure.webs.com](http://www.marylandcure.webs.com)

- Strategy and Action Workshops will address the following:
- Victim's Voices on Preventing Violence
- Neighborhood Mobilization
- Non-Violent Conflict Prevention
- Community Peace Initiative Symposia
- Youth Employment & Internships
- Citizenship, Civics and Public Service
- Youth Legal Awareness Seminars
- Leveraging Prisoners & Gangs to Reduce Violence

The 2010 Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) Task Force to Study Prison Violence concluded the following:

- Many prisons are dominated by gangs that originated within prisons
- Maryland Division of Corrections has documented more than 250 different gangs and approximately 3400 gang members within its correction facilities
- The gang population has been growing with a steady increase in both male and female gang members
- The Peace Initiative is a credible undertaking being sponsored by DPSCS at JCI

## Maryland CURE's Major 2013 Goals

- ❖ work to establish open communication with the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services
- ❖ zero in on family visitation opportunities for inmates

**Continued –**

Others states have followed suit. Why not Maryland? The state's "tough on crime" policies have increased the length of sentences, and a general disdain for releasing offenders on parole has led to the graying of the inmate population. Long-term incarceration has left our nation's correctional system with two basic alternatives to the status quo: Build geriatric prisons with hospice units, where costs are lower due to the reduced need for security and other factors, or start letting harmless old, dying people go free. I think the latter is unlikely.

I'm 61, and I recently suffered a health scare when a prison doctor suspected I had throat cancer. Thankfully, a biopsy came back benign, but the experience made me think about a time when I may be in Lonnie, Charlie and Willie's place.

I know many readers will be at peace with that image, but I would argue that the notion of hospice gets at a fundamental question: What do we want for those who are incarcerated for long periods – in many cases, for the remainder of their lives?

Prison hospice is not just for dying prisoners. At Angola, observers have seen the profound effect the program has on the prisoners who serve as hospice volunteers, supporting and caring for others in the final stages of incurable illness. For me, merely visiting with dying prisoners has brought me face to face with the shock, despair and horror of death. It has helped me to better understand the losses I caused, and this empathetic bridge with all victims wracks my soul with an unending remorse. My prayers go out to my victims and their families.

Those of us living behind bars become shadows of humanity. In life, we are greatly diminished. When death beckons, the specter of fear takes hold. I ask that you allow us the simple dignity of hospice care so that we don't have to face that fear alone.

Note: The writer is serving two life terms at Jessup Correctional Institution. He is a founder and director of the Extra Legalese Group prisoner's organization.

**The New Jim Crow**

*The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, is a stunning account of the rebirth of a caste-like system in the United States, one that has resulted in millions of African Americans locked behind bars and then relegated to a permanent second-class status—denied the very rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement. Since its publication in 2010, the book has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than a year; been dubbed the “secular bible of a new social movement” by numerous commentators, including Cornel West and has led to consciousness-raising efforts in universities, churches, community centers, re-entry centers, and prisons nationwide. *The New Jim Crow* tells a truth our nation has been reluctant to face.

Alexander considers the evidence and concludes that our prison system is a unique form of social control, much like slavery and Jim Crow, the systems it has replaced. She shows that, by targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness.

*The New Jim Crow* challenges the civil rights community—and all of us—to place mass incarceration at the forefront of a new movement for racial justice in America.

--<http://newjimcrow.com>

**More Thoughts to Reflect on**

*Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.*

Buddha

*Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broke is made whole again, what is soiled is made clean again.*

Dag Hammarskjöld

*He who angers you conquers you.*

Elizabeth Kenny

*Maryland CURE is a Chapter of CURE, a national grass-roots organization dedicated to reducing crime through reform of the criminal justice system.*



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### Who is Your Congressman?

Click <http://www.house.gov/> to find your representative with your zip code+4. Or just call the U.S. Capitol Switch Board at 202-224-3121 and ask for your representative. They will patch you through to the correct office.

Voice your opinions to all your representatives in Congress, the Senate, and in the State. They want your votes and will pay attention to your needs.

We are honored to announce new board members Christine Davenport, Jak Elliot and Pamela Griffith as well as our new Board Chair Bonnita Spikes

Next Maryland CURE Meeting  
July 20, 2013, Central Branch Library  
Columbia, MD  
10:30 to 12:30 p.m.  
Check website for directions  
[www.marylandcure.webs.com](http://www.marylandcure.webs.com)

#### Dues for Membership

- Prisoners           \$2 (or 4 stamps)
- Individual         \$10
- Family             \$15
- Life                 \$100

Ninety-five percent of prisoners (more than 600,000 people each year) eventually go home. What happened while they were inside-whether they received job training, adequate healthcare, or learned positive life skills, or whether they were embittered, recruited into a gang, or made connections in the criminal underworld-has profound consequences for the society they return to.

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