



TO TRANSITION ...OR NOT

As lifers continue to parole in record numbers there has been much discussion these days as to whether or not lifers preparing to go to board hearings 'must' or even 'should' plan on paroling to transitional housing prior to finding other housing or even returning to their families. And there is no definitive answer.

While some attorneys (who shall be nameless but annoying) continue to tell their clients that they 'must' or will be 'required' to have transitional housing acceptance if they expect to be found suitable, that is simply NOT the case. In speaking with both administration at the BPH as well as several individual commissioners, the answer is always the same; transitional housing is not a requirement and you will not be denied parole simply because your plans do not include a stint in such a facility. Does the board like transitional housing? Yes, certainly. Do they feel more at ease when an inmate proposes to include this in their parole plans? Yes, somewhat. Is it often useful and a good idea? Yes, without question. Does one-size fit all? Assuredly, not.

Transitional housing is often a good idea, especially for those long-serving lifers who have either lost or lost touch with family and have no specific 'home' to parole to. It is also very useful even for those long-timers who do have family, as the shock of finally having a lifer come home is felt on both sides—by the former prisoner and his family, whether that family be Mom and Dad or wife. It's a case of you-don't-know-what-you-don't know, and neither do your loved ones. The change, the stress and the day-to-day of getting back into life are a huge challenge and oft times a bit of help from someone else who has walked that path is very helpful. And that help can be found in the fellowship of transitional living.

So while we think a stay in transitional housing can be a tremendous help to paroling lifers—and their families—all transitional housing is not created equal. For those lifers who, after consideration, believe planning a first stop in transitional living is a good idea, we say, we agree; but be careful

where you choose to go. While 'transitional housing' is right now a growing industry, too many of these transitional homes are, in reality, simply more substance abuse treatment facilities, and not true transitional homes.

These often can be very frustrating, impeding and lacking in providing what paroling lifers need. LSA has dived head-long into this fray, talking about options (not THAT Options) for lifers with the BPH, DAPO, parole agents, Division of Rehabilitative Programs (DRP) and even the vendors who operate many of the best known 'programs.' We've talked to parole lifers who went through some of the various transitional facilities available, asking about the good (some) the bad (some) and the ugly (yeah, some of that too). And here's our conclusion.

Yes, the board likes to see transitional housing in a parole plan, because they are aware of the challenges of life and liberty you will be facing. It makes the board feel as though you are serious about success and taking advantage of every opportunity to find support and reentry help. And so you should. But if you have good, solid plans to parole to a family member, that, too, is possible. If you do opt for transitional housing, start early to investigate what's available in your area of choice and what the specific program requirements are for those facilities. It would help if there was a one, or even several, reliable lists of transitional housing in various areas, but there isn't. Unfortunately, some 'programs' change with the wind. And while we've got research underway in our office to develop at least a basic list of what and where, it's still a work in progress.

When you hear of a program and are about to ask for a letter of acceptance, be sure you ask specifically about the restrictions of the program, the costs (if any, many are state funded) how long you must stay in the house and what sort of help, other than substance abuse counseling, they provide. There is, in our opinion, nothing worse than a drug and alcohol certified counselor/former lifer being stuck for 6 months in a restrictive substance abuse programming house--back in Addiction 101.



Understand clearly the program you've requested acceptance into and realize that if you are placed there, either by the board or your agent, then you will be there until (a) the end of the program (b) you manage to accomplish a transfer, not an easy task. And, as of right now, there are few programs specifically targeted at lifers and their needs—many are just plugging you into their on-going program, showing another occupied bed.

LSA recently presented our basics as to what lifers DO and DO NOT need in transitional housing to a meeting of parole supervisors and administrators. And we will be doing so again, at future meetings. These are not just our own ideas, these are culled from experiences of paroled lifers and we are continually updating the information.

So consider some of these points as you make your plans. Remember, transitional housing, true transitional/sober living environment, can be a tremendous boon to lifers suffering from the Rip Van Winkle effect. But changing custody from behind the wire to behind the fence can be suffocating.



What Lifers Need in Transitional Housing—Life Skills

- 1) Help in Re-establish identity (DL, SS #)
- 2) Social and relationship skills—how to get along in society these days
- 3) Money, budgeting, shopping—how to use debit card, electronic banking, automatic deposit, the cost of everything,
- 4) Navigating the technological society—on-line job apps, don't put everything on Facebook,
- 5) Shedding the Rip Van Winkle effect—things have changed and you'll need some pointers in how the world runs now--mentoring
- 6) Contact with family and friends—you need to reestablish these relationships, not be held back by blackouts



What Lifers Don't Need in Transitional Housing—Treatment/Custody

- 1) Substance abuse/sobriety treatment—constant, daily programming on getting clean
- 2) Blackouts—impede both family reunification and true reentry
- 3) Warehousing—restrictions to the facility only slow down your reintegration
- 4) 24/7 supervision—if you needed that, you'd still be behind the wire
- 5) Restrictions on communication/contact—you can't look for a job, talk to your family, find your life if you can't have a cell phone, letters or spend the day with people
- 6) Babysitting—you need the freedom to relearn how to make your own day-to-day decisions, including when to eat, how to manage your time and get around

CONNECTING THE DOTS.....

Insight, understanding, remorse. All very subjective topics, but all necessary for a lifer to exhibit before the BPH panels are willing to consider him/her sufficiently rehabilitated to reach that threshold of being 'no longer an unreasonable risk of danger to society.'

Often times it's a bit like the old saying about art; I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it. Inmates often come to hearings with some understanding that the effects of their past influenced their actions that resulted in a crime, but when asked to put it all together, to connect the dots and talk about 'the causative factors' of the crime—they draw a blank. One commissioner reported his growing frustration and concern with prospective parolees who, when asked why the crime happened could only say 'I hated my father.'

Ok, clearly a problem, but how did issues with your father result in a major crime involving a totally different man, one you'd perhaps never met before? This is the story of one former lifer, now paroled, who was able to find that insight, connect the dots and articulate the causative factors of his crime. It's not everyone's story or solution, but it does illustrate how events effect emotions, which affect perceptions and attitudes, which influence decisions, which often result in extreme actions.

These are snapshots from a life, snippets of events that culminated in a personal and societal disaster of huge impact, that was at once predictable and yet unforeseen.

I was born to an alcoholic father and co-dependent mother. My parents moved around a lot and divorced when I was very young, after which I didn't see my father for many years. My mother married my step-father, who was also an alcoholic. He was away a lot but always drunk when he was around.

He was abusive to me and my mother. I hated him because he used to torment and humiliate me, but at that time I didn't realize there was anything wrong with my life. When I was in elementary school I caught my mother in a compromising situation with the father of my best friend; it crushed me and took away all my trust of her. My mother always provided all the tangible things I needed; food, clothing, housing, taught me manners, etcetera; but growing up I can't remember her ever hugging me.

Eventually, we fled my step-father and moved again. I didn't know anyone and I had a hard time fitting in. I hated school because I felt like I didn't fit, wound up in a lot of fights and was miserable. My mother didn't understand me and we fought, awfully, also. I was an angry young man and thought I should be left in charge of my own life.

At the age of 12 my mother introduced me to alcohol and to pot at the age of 13. I was prescribed Ritalin to settle me down; it is an amphetamine. At some point I stole the whole bottle and abused it with a friend and that was the end of prescription Ritalin, but I came to realize that Ritalin had fostered an affinity for amphetamines.

All of my drug use was achieved through a lifestyle of dealing drugs; that was the only way I could afford it. But the drug life morality we lived by wasn't conducive to building lasting relationships. Quite frankly, I've found that drug addiction and stable relationships don't seem to co-exist very well. Defeated after another in a long line of failed relationships, I threw in the towel and ran headlong back into the only lifestyle I knew, that of an addicted drug dealer trying to fake being a citizen.

In time, I was shot in the shoulder/chest and nearly killed. My lifelong mindset of solving my own problems culminated in deciding that, "since everybody carried a gun nowadays, I needed to start carrying a gun too." Just 5 ½ weeks after being shot myself, I got into a confrontation. I felt overwhelmed with humiliation and became enraged and as a result I shot someone. One big difference is that the man I shot died; and almost inevitably, I found myself in jail and later convicted of murder, sentenced to 27 years to life.

After many years in prison and much self-help I realized my thinking had degenerated drastically from what is acceptable in order for my life to get to the place where it was okay in my head to kill somebody. I'm convinced that without fail that we operate on what we believe in. When I committed that heinous crime, somehow in my mind I believed it was the right thing for me to do at that time. Even so, the instant it occurred I knew I had made the biggest mistake of my life and that it was irreversible.

Thus began my process of self-discovery; I began to practically examine myself. And I was able to see some pretty significant things.

I realized that my father's absence resulted in me feeling abandoned by him which resulted in low self-esteem. From that grew an unhealthy quest for approval, and actions that would allow me to 'fit in.' All the moving around while growing up resulted in many broken friendships. The result was a fear of intimacy, so I quit making any real connections and became a loner. My relationship with my mother fostered problems with how

I viewed women and trust. As a result of my stepfather's torment I adopted the mindset that I had to solve all my own problems and figure everything out for myself because there was never going to be anyone I could count on, especially an authority figure.

Being subjected to his humiliation made me feel stupid and inadequate, which fortified my need to prove myself, but it also made me very angry and frustrated. This resulted in serious anger issues and the fact that violence seemed to solve some problems, and at least for a moment relieved stress, fortified a belief in violence.

I was full of fear of every kind and unable to communicate about the fear or the things that caused it. I was only able to bottle it up until it got to the breaking point. Then I would explode in a violent rage. So I learned that I grew up full of anger, resentment, shame and remorse. I didn't know it at the time because I had never known anything else. But it was no wonder that drugs and alcohol seemed such a solution for me.

I learned that the anger, resentment, shame and remorse lead to self-centered actions trying to prove my worth. If substance abuse and/or violence salved those feelings, even for a moment, then that seemed to be the solution. But those solutions never worked for long and the feelings never stayed away. I was barricaded in my own lack of understanding and denial; I had put so much time and effort into rationalizing my actions as the fault of someone else or what I had to do to be a man, I didn't realize that time and effort was spent in building the very prison that dictated so much of my out of control behavior.

That's how the dots connect and knowing how that pattern of dots connected to create such an ugly picture will help you re-draw those connections into a picture of someone able to cope with emotions we all feel; stress, anger, fear, without resorting to violence. Someone who is no longer an unreasonable risk of danger to society.

You can't begin to understand the "causative factors of your crime" until you go back to what caused your thinking, your feelings, to be outside lines of society. Because the events of your life caused your feelings, which led to your thinking, which developed your belief system, which rationalized your actions as the best course you could take in any given situation. That's how the dots connect and knowing how that pattern of dots connected to create such an ugly picture will help you re-draw those connections into a picture of someone able to cope with emotions we all feel; stress, anger, fear, without resorting to violence. Someone who is no longer an unreasonable risk of danger to society.

A WHOOPING BIG THANKS TO THE LADIES AT CIW

We've always been impressed by the character of the many ladies, lifers and other long-termers, we've had the opportunity and great pleasure to meet at California Institute for Women, and those ladies just gladdened our hearts once again. Just as this issue of Lifer-Line was being finalized, LSA received a tremendous boost from the CIW Long-Termers group in the form of a check for \$4,000--proceeds from their recent food sale.

This is a huge boost to our donation-driven coffers and we've earmarked part of these funds for our "From the Date to the Gate" project, aimed specifically at lifers granted a date and awaiting release. We can't think of a better investment for these ladies' hard earned monies. Thank you CIW—not only is your gift of great practical benefit, you also affirm our mission and our work. We'll be back!

SEMINAR 2015—SACRAMENTO

LSA's first lifer family seminar, in Sacramento, was a rousing success with about 50 family members in attendance. We were pleased to have Jennifer Shaffer, Executive Director of the BPH and Inspector General Robert Barton present to the attendees, as well as about a dozen paroled lifers, some of whom are pictured below. Our next seminar will be in Southern California.

Ms. Shaffer explained her philosophy in directing the day-to-day operations of the BPH, noting that she is not focused on reaching a specific number or percentage of grants or denials, but on providing training and education to parole commissioners to enable them to make decisions in line with the law. She related to the audience her commitment to Governor Brown to provide his administration with the best trained and educated BPH possible, one whose members would be able to make lawful decisions that could withstand judicial scrutiny. And she reaffirmed her commitment to transparency and openness in government.

Mr. Barton explained the duties of the Inspector General's office in overseeing CDCR and specific duties that entails, including vetting all warden candidates and monitoring several varieties of CDCR inquiries, including internal investigations. He also noted his personal and professional commitment to transparency in government dealings.

Nearly a dozen paroled lifers offered short versions of their stories of change and release, providing hope and inspiration to families and proving, once again, that lifers are the best of the best. Each participant in the day's events is currently involved in successful reintegration and most in pro-social community programs and efforts.



BPH Executive Director Jennifer Shaffer and Inspector General Robert Barton, speaking at LSA's lifer family Seminar In Sacramento, Feb.28, 2015



Paroled lifers attending the seminar, speaking hope and change to families. Back, L-R, Mariano Munoz David Sloane, Eugene Dey. Front, L-R; William Rucker, Willie Redmond, Daniel Silva, Alfredo Rico and the incomparable John Dannenberg

Families were given a wealth of information on how they can assist their lifers in being found suitable as well as a heads up on some of the challenges they, and their lifers, will face during that coming home process. Our thanks to all participants for making the kick-off seminar of 2015 such a great event.