



Public Safety and Fiscal Responsibility

JUNE 2016

LIFER-LINE

THE NEWSLETTER OF LIFE SUPPORT ALLIANCE © LSA, 2016

VOL. 7 ISSUE 6

Family

FAMILY VISITS; DON'T PACK THE OVERNIGHT JUST BAG YET

Questions, rumors, hopes and expectations about family visits for lifers occupy an unimaginable amount of time for us here at LSA. Time and again we've had to say no; no, that rumor isn't correct; no, female prisoners aren't getting family visits; no, appeals to the Congress or the President won't bring back lifer family visits.

Now we can finally say yes; well, a qualified yes. But yes, family visits are (probably) going to be returned to lifers. When? Don't know. How to qualify? Don't know.

For sure? Well, nothing is sure, but probably. Will LWOPS be included? Not sure, but at this point, it appears no, at least not yet.

All of this is predicated on a few lines in the budget package passed by the state legislature and signed by Governor Brown. Page 42 of the budget message contains these words:

"Extended Family Visits—the budget includes statutory changes to allow life-term inmates to be eligible for extended family visits."

That's it. No other explanation, information or verbiage. The single line is part of an equally thought-we'd-never-see-it section of the budget, devoted entirely to "Expansion of Programs and Services for Lifer Population." More on that elsewhere in this newsletter, but it was heartening to see much of what we have been admonishing CDCR about for the last 6+ years now being spouted to us. Talk about preaching to the choir!

So, cut to the chase, here's a summary of what we know and don't know about restoration of family visits for lifers. In short, don't pack your bags or hold your breath yet—but it's at least in view.

Yes, there are funds in the state budget earmarked, at this point, to restore family visits for lifers---but please be very careful celebrating this. We've known for some time that money was earmarked for what was first termed 'extended visiting' and was not specified as to whether this was to extend visiting days or for family visits. Now that the intent is clear, we still do not think this will happen immediately--in an election year everyone moves with caution on controversial topics, and this is still controversial.

The budget does not contain information on how soon this must be done or how the process will be conducted or who will qualify, all those things are left to CDCR to figure out and put in place and we all know they are not speed demons. Individual prisons won't have any information. Please be quietly joyful and don't start packing your overnight bags just yet....a few more months will be needed.

As of now, there is no mention of including LWOP in this, but you never know, things are changing rapidly and certainly we will be advocating for including those individuals. The devil will be in the details of how this will be implemented, who will qualify, how fast it gets done, etc. Many family visiting units at various prisons are now being used for offices, storage space and any number of other uses, some even have reportedly been condemned as uninhabitable, so many changes and upgrades will need to be made.

We (LSA) are meeting with CDCR officials the week of July 5 and you can be sure the implementation of this is at the top of our list.



LIFERS NO LONGER FORGOTTEN PRISONERS

What started out for us at LSA, advocating for lifers, as a rather lonely place in the discourse about corrections and reform has suddenly become very populated, very loud and, at last, very official. It leaves us a bit bemused, to hear the very same words we've said over and over again for the last several years now coming from CDCR officials—and, wonder of wonders, the state budget as well.

In advocating for more parole grants we first said 'California cannot afford vengeance as public policy.' And were amazed to hear those very words from a state Senator during a bill hearing. One step forward.

Then we made the low recidivism of lifers our mantra (Lifers recidivate at less than 1%). And smiled to ourselves when a parole commissioner quoted that fact during his confirmation hearing. Two steps forward.

Next step was convincing the department—all divisions—that lifers weren't like other prisoners in their programming needs and what helps them on release. We used words like 'unique cohort' and 'special needs' and needing 'programs created just for them.' We talked about the challenges facing

those who have been removed from society for so long, the need for help in understanding those changes in society, catching up on their social skills and that lifers are their own best mentors.

So you can imagine our delight, our satisfaction, our sense of fulfillment when at a recent meeting to discuss programming for lifers we heard, from CDCR officials, announcements that they have discovered lifers are ‘unique,’ with ‘special needs’ and are ‘better served by programs tailored to their needs.’ Can we get an Amen here?

And it appears both CDCR and the current state government administration is prepared to put the state’s money where its mouth recently arrived; funding those special programs and needs. The current, just-signed budget includes several million dollars specifically set aside for programs to serve lifers, both still incarcerated and on parole. Multiple steps forward.

And while we still have some reservations on the content of the programs and whether or not they will indeed be new programs or just re-vamps of those already serving other inmate cohorts, clearly lifers now have their own place in rehabilitation and reentry. Herewith, in a general summary, are some of the programs lifers, inside and out, can look forward to in the next fiscal year.

We quote here directly from the state budget summary, which is long on generalities and short on specifics, and since we all know the devil is in the details and the details are in the implementation, we’ll be watching, arguing, urging and generally being a pain in CDCR’s collective back side to make sure the best possible outcomes are achieved.



“Expansion of programs and services for lifer population”

In recent years the number of long-term offenders being released after serving lengthy periods of incarceration has steadily increased. The Board of Parole Hearings indicates that approximately 80 per cent of life term offenders released to parole require or request transitional housing as part of their parole plans. Furthermore, the needs of offenders incarcerated for long terms are unique and better served by programs tailored to their needs. The Budget includes the following investments specifically target to long-term offenders:

- Parolee Service Center Beds—the budget includes \$3.1 million general funds to add 136 parolee service center beds on a statewide basis. Parolee service centers provide residential support services that focus on employment, job search and placement training, substance use disorder education, stress management, victim awareness, computer supported literacy and life skills.
- In Prison Long Term Offender Program—the budget includes \$3.4 million general fund of which 2.1 million is a onetime to add a LTOP program at male level III or IV facility, increasing the number of slots by approximately 17000. The voluntary in prison reentry program is designed specifically for long-term offenders, providing substance use disorder treatment, criminal thinking, anger management, family relations, victim impact, denial management and employment readiness

- Offender Mentor Certification Program—the budget includes \$423,000 general fund for offender mentor certification program. Long term and life term inmates who complete this voluntary 10-month program are trained and certified to become mentors for alcohol and drug counseling. Upon completion inmates are assigned as mentors and obtain 4,000 hours of work experience in substance use disorder treatment programs. Once those hours are fulfilled inmates are eligible to obtain a substance use disorder counseling certification that can be used to gain employment upon release. This augmentation will enable the department to train ad additional 64 inmates annually.
- Pre-employment transition program—the budget includes \$3.1 million general fund to expand the transitions program to all institutions to offer employment preparation, teaching job-readiness, job search and pre-requisite skills need for the current job market. Participants learn about community resources and programs to help with transitioning and are linked to one stop career centers and social service agencies in their counties of residence. The department will discontinue the use of contractors for this program and will hire teachers to serve approximately 23,000 inmates annually.
- Extended family visits—the budget includes statutory changes to allow life-term inmates to be eligible for extended family visits.

The department will also begin efforts to develop a program that provides 6-month transitional housing in locations closest to the communities in which life term inmates will be released. Offenders serving long terms in prison are often unprepared for reentering society due to changes in technology and day-to-day living advances. Transitional housing will assist these offenders to successfully reenter society. Additionally, the Department has taken steps to allow offenders placed in transitional housing immediate access to community leave passes, phones, and visitation and to place these parolees in an appropriate service or treatment program based on their needs assessment. “



THIS WAS JUST TOO MUCH

We don't usually print editorials in Lifer-Line, but this time, we're making an exception.

We've become accustomed to hearing a variety of opinions, emotions and, from time to time, just plain nonsense at the monthly BPH Executive Meetings, the business sessions of the BPH. And we've no doubt contributed our share to all those categories.

But it was a little astounding at the June meeting when a couple of self-proclaimed victims' rights champions rose to tell the commissioners how they think parole hearings should go, righteously announcing they were speaking on behalf of 'the public.' Well, not really; we're part of the public and they certainly don't speak for us.

And while we won't print names, under the practice of not giving fools more recognition than they deserve, their comments were not only offense, but completely, well, misguided is about the kindest thing we can say. We could also say stupid, illogical and half-witted. But we won't.

Mr. X expounded on his immense understanding of the parole process after attending a whole 10 hearings, telling the commissioners he can't understand why "these people" were being paroled. He asked the commissioners to exercise 'common sense' in parole considerations, which to Mr. X obviously meant no parole for anyone.

Ms. Z castigated the commissioners for their "blatant disregard for public safety" in issuing parole grants. She then went on to make perhaps the most ridiculous statement heard the BPH meetings in some time. While saying she understood the board must follow the law, she suggested that perhaps the board needn't "follow the letter of the law."

Really? We can pick and choose which laws, or parts of laws we want to follow? We suggest to Ms. Z that the next time she gets a traffic ticket for not coming to a complete stop at a stop sign she request of the traffic cop that he not "follow the letter of the law" and see how that goes for her. And isn't making our own decisions about what laws, or parts of laws, we'll follow what got many individuals in prison in the first place? Do the laws, even parts of laws, apply to some, but, perhaps, not to "these people?"

Z said the board was 'under orders to allow certain individuals go whether or not they meet the criteria' for parole. Orders from who? A higher power? Would that be a deity or just Jerry Brown? We were insulted on behalf of the commissioners.

A relative of a victim in a high-profile crime, Z has made it her life and claim to fame to be a victims' representative for any and all. That's OK, we do the same on the other side. But we try to work from fact, a policy of advocating following, not cherry-picking the law, and knowing about the process from more than just our side of the street. We'd suggest she, and her cohorts, try the same.

We haven't heard much about inappropriate conduct by victims' family at hearings, but it happens, and not infrequently. More than one lifer has been paroled far from his home county, not for the safety of the victim, but for his safety and well-being. And that doesn't even take into consideration the number of irresponsible conjectures and unfounded accusations of other, uncharged crimes we've often heard made against some inmates at hearings.

While the parole panel members often caution or admonish the family members about comments and behavior, that seems rather weak sauce for some of what we've seen and heard, including threats against inmates and even their attorneys. We understand the victims are the injured parties here, and that they have a legal, let alone moral right, to be part of the process. To a point.

But if following the law is what they are advocating, and what we all should be advocating, then they should be held to that standard, and not suggest laws be waived or selectively enforced, even for their benefit. Those individuals in prison are there because they failed to follow the law and we extract a price from them for that failure and expect them to follow the laws going forward.

To suggest, even in righteous indignation, that laws be set aside because we're dealing with prisoners flies in the face of every legal precept from the Constitution to the parole board itself. The laws aren't different for 'us' and 'them'; the laws are the laws. And to suggest otherwise goes too far.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LIFER PICNIC, 2016

The Fourth Annual Lifer Freedom Celebration, hosted by legal-beagle and former lifer Gary Eccher, was held June 15 in Buena Park. Great turnout, great food and even greater friendship and enjoyment. A few of those attending pictured below.



Host Gary Eccher, Lateef, and Taahir (Michael) Prather



Some of the lady lifers attending—glad to see them!



Vanessa Sloane (LSA) Atty, Debbie Page, Sister Mary Sean



Newly-minted lawyer, LSA and Eccher supporter Keith Chandler



Getting lifers together for a picture is like herding cats..nearly impossible. Maybe someone should yell 'Count Time' or 'Yard Recall'