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**TO:** The NIFI Board Members and the NIF Network

**FROM:** David Mathews, Chair of the National Issues Forums Institute

**DATE:** February 26, 2020

**RE:** Forums in prisons

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Attached is another Maura Casey interview. It is about forums in an unlikely place, prisons. Bill DiMascio has reported similar results from prisons in Pennsylvania.

I am sending to you because there is a special emphasis this year in including our fellow citizens who have sometimes been unrepresented in the existing forums. The unrepresented include men, rural, conservatives, business, and others.

If you can think of ways to make your forums more representative, great! Some have done that by allying with other organizations that will sign up as sponsors. Still another way to broaden participation might be to offer to hold forums in organizations that don't normally convene NIF meetings. And there is always the option of inviting people you think might be reluctant to attend without an invitation.

Whatever you feel comfortable in doing, please help bring everyone you can to reason together in 2020.

DM:kh  
Attachment

## **In deliberative public forums behind bars, inmates find their voices**

By Maura Casey

MacDougall Correctional Facility in Ridgeville, S.C. resembles a community college with its low buildings and manicured landscaping. The 600-plus prisoners who live here walk freely among buildings from their dorms to classes in auto body work or horticulture, or for those without a high school diploma, mandatory classes to take the General Educational Development exam. Others work on a chicken farm, in food service, in the laundry, or work to maintain the neatly-clipped lawns.

The men sleep in barracks; ex-members of the military can apply to live in a hall where more than 90 veterans live, decorated with emblems of all the branches of the armed forces. Yet the chain link fences topped with razor wire remind the visitor that this is still a prison, with people in it who have sentences ranging from a few years to life.

"Inmates apply to enter this facility from prisons all over the state," said Sgt. Charles Turbide. "The atmosphere is more flexible. Someday, these men will be your neighbors and mine, so we try to get their minds on the outside."

Part of getting their minds on the outside is the option of attending the National Issues Forums run by Barbara Brown, who has, for three years, driven more than an hour from her Sumter, S.C. home to the prison to moderate deliberations. Her request to run the deliberative forums in the prison on a regular basis was not taken lightly, said Capt. William Langdon.

"When Ms. Brown first proposed her outline, some eyebrows were raised. We worried that the residents would get volatile with each other," Langdon said. "But she included the possibility that the residents could also become moderators. That helps them be able to accept and tolerate other views. Just because someone has a different view doesn't mean you have a hostile view," he said.

Within a year after Barbara started offering the forums twice a month, the activity won over the prison staff as well as those who are incarcerated.

"For them to be able to learn something and have people listen to their opinions opened up their minds and eyes," said Langdon, who said the forums contribute to a better atmosphere in the prison, which, in turn, helps make it safer. "It allows them contact with the outside and gives them an education learning different things. More informed offenders make a better transition to society. The topics have an impact on our community and our country," he said.

Barbara sees her contribution as something fundamental to being an American. "I do this because I believe in democracy," she said. She has moderated forums in various settings for more than 30 years, through jobs as varied as working for an Anheuser-

Busch distributor and with the Clemson University Extension Service. In the past she helped teenagers start their own community center in her hometown. More recently, Barbara proudly related how her granddaughter, galvanized into action over two suicides of classmates in her Washington State high school, met with state officials about the need for suicide prevention.

But running forums for the men in prison is something Barbara is particularly passionate about. Even when her 45-year-old son died after an illness last year she only took off a month or two. One reason may be that she can see the impact that a consistent activity so focused on rights and responsibilities of citizenship brings to those who live behind bars. Another might be her stubborn optimism, rooted in her belief that the world is a little better if we can talk to one another.

Barbara uses National Issues Forums guides which, no matter what the subject, outline three options, each with actions that all have upsides and possible negative impacts. In this way, the guides try to avoid the polarizing debate that just two choices might spark.

As her forums have continued over the years, prison participants have brought their own research, not just their opinions, to the deliberations, she said. The experience of grappling with how to respond to public problems reminds them that they will someday live outside the prison walls. "They say, 'This gives us hope,'" she said, just before we handed over our driver's licenses to be admitted through the front gates.

On this autumn day, 10 inmates signed up to deliberate about how to address the opioid epidemic, with three options outlined in the National Issues Forums guide: Focus on Treatment for All, Focus on Enforcement, and Focus on Individual Choice.

The men needed little encouragement to begin deliberating about the issue. Some had dealt in drugs, others had been in treatment, and all of them knew people swept up in the opioid epidemic in some way. The prison asked that the identities of the participants not be revealed in this article.

They were a tough audience for the "Treatment for all" first option.

"It starts with yourself," said the first man to talk. "You can't force nothing on anyone. I've been an addict, but I had to *want* to change," he emphasized. "I am in recovery every day."

"I've been in treatment, too," said another. "You have guys who enter to stay off drugs for three months just to avoid going to prison."

"Yes, but 90 percent of the people within these walls are here because of drugs," said one man who said he once had lived in New Jersey. "They should build more treatment centers. That said, you have to ask for help. You gotta say, 'I've had enough.'"

Another chimed in. "A lot of us have psychological scars from childhood, and we had to find a way to deal with it all. For some of us, it was drugs."

The first man spoke again, sharply disagreeing. "I don't believe in that. If you go through something as a child, grow up and find somebody to talk to. That's it," he said. "I started with cough medicine and worked my way up to cocaine and pills. Then I ended up killing one of my friends. You have to make amends and ask for forgiveness. We can't baby addicts—you have to hit bottom."

"If we go with this option, the community would have to get involved," said Barbara, which led to discussing what people could do, and what those in the room could do once they left prison and live on the outside.

The second option, "Focus on Enforcement," struck many in the room as incomplete unless the approach was broader than arresting individuals. They wondered why so many people are arrested for drugs while the drug companies seem to get off with little or no repercussions for increasing fatality rates.

"Drugs are a trillion-dollar business. We have little power in this room," said one man who had been quiet until that point in the discussion.

The one statement that brought a chorus of agreement was the need to keep kids out of the drug trade—and from using—so that enforcement was less necessary.

"Too many kids think drug use is normal," said one man. "In my neighborhood, growing up, when we saw people die we would step over the bodies and ignore it. But when my kids were young, and I saw more and more drugs come to our neighborhood, I packed them up and moved," he said.

"Is the drug problem a threat to our democracy?" Barbara asked.

Nods and "Absolutely" and "of course" greeted her question. "But it is a problem at least in part because of American greed," one said. "We can't just blame a country like China because it manufactures fentanyl, which opioid users overdose on. This is our responsibility," he said.

The final option, "Focus on Individual Choice," helped turn the topic to the question of individual responsibility—a tall order, to some.

"As long as you have poverty there will be someone trying to steal and sell drugs," one said.

"But it starts with the self," another said.

"We can reduce addiction by being better parents. We have to make a better example," said a man who said he grew up in Pennsylvania.

“Everyone has a responsibility to address this epidemic,” one man said as the deliberation wrapped up. “My parents were not involved in neighborhood crime watch because they thought they didn’t need to worry. But after I got arrested, they got more involved with the community,” he said.

“Each of you can do things to make democracy work,” Barbara said. “Deliberative dialogues are a good first step. You can continue these discussions with others later,” she said. She has been encouraged, she said, by reports that some of the men do, indeed, carry on deliberations with others after the forums are over.

“Participation among inmates is sometimes sporadic because everyone has to have a job during the day,” Capt. Langdon said. “But I’ve seen guys that don’t say too much get involved. Acceptance and tolerance is something that the offenders get to practice in these forums.”

“At some point, these men will be our neighbors,” Langdon said. “There are some highly intelligent people here who just zipped when they should have zagged.”

*Maura Casey is a Kettering Foundation senior associate and a former editorial writer for The New York Times.*