



**Extra Legalese Group Peace Initiative
Symposium Wins an
'Innovator of the Year' Award**

The publisher and executive editor of the Daily Record presented the 2011 "Innovators of the Year" at the American Visionary Arts Museum in Baltimore on Oct 29, 2011.



Among the recipients of this year's awards was the Extra Legalese Group (ELG) for their Peace Initiative, to stop gang violence inside AND outside prisons. The ELG was selected for demonstrating "the ability to see a need and fill it and the courage to make change happen."

Jennifer Adkins' son, Christopher Jones was only 14 when he was killed by gang members. She was asked by the prisoners to accept the award for them at the November awards ceremony.

Adkins and Christopher's father, a deputy sheriff, had been inside JCI a year earlier to meet with the ELG about its Peace Initiative. At one of the meetings, touched by the story of Christopher, gang leaders pledged efforts to stop random gang violence

A Community Support Coalition, which is helping the ELG, is made up of attorneys, educators and community and reentry program leaders including representatives of the NAACP, Fusion, Justice Policy Institute, Safe Streets Baltimore and the Jericho program.

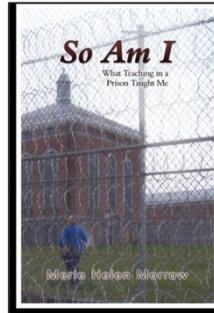
Six men at Jessup Correctional Institution (JCI) in Maryland formed the think tank, Extra Legalese and set about becoming the change they wanted to see. Within the prison community, they got the word out to all gang leaders and religious leaders and held a meeting, under the eye of the staff, to discuss making changes in the system in a non-violent way. They wanted a way to prevent gang violence and to prevent victimization through the promotion of peace.

Out of this was born the idea for the Peace Initiative, a process that begins in prison and extends into the community. The process focuses on ending the gang initiation rite of randomly targeting innocent people with violence. It will focus on integrating at-risk youth, gangs, and prisoners into the community in constructive roles that will reduce the numbers of perpetrators.

CURE SPOTLIGHT

So Am I: What Teaching in a Prison Taught Me

is a fascinating portrait of men in a GED class in a maximum-security prison working diligently to better themselves under sometimes heartbreakingly difficult circumstances. It also portrays Merle Helen Morrow's struggle to view her students as multi-faceted individuals, rather than simply as convicts—a struggle made more difficult when, after one and a half years of teaching, she discovered the nature of her student's crimes and had to reconcile that knowledge with her feelings toward the men she had come to know and respect as friends.



Morrow's perception of prisoners first began to change on September 11, 2001, when she saw the sorrow and patriotism of prisoners in a maximum-security prison she was visiting in connection with her job at the Department of Justice. As a result, Morrow retired from the Department of Justice, and spring of 2002 found her teaching a GED class at the Maryland House of Correction, a men's maximum-security prison.

Initially intimidated by the prisoners, Morrow soon developed a rapport with the students in her class and found herself admiring their effort and their fortitude in the face of tremendous, albeit self-inflicted, difficulty. Her relationship with her students inspired in her the desire to share their stories with the outside world. Morrow made a promise to one of her students that she would let the general population know that the men in prison were "not all monsters," but rather that many of them, like the men in her class, were individual human beings who had committed crimes but were trying to rehabilitate themselves, with little to no help either from the outside or from within the system that confined them.

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Author Merle Helen Morrow practiced law for thirty years, and upon retirement taught a GED class in a men's maximum security prison for over three years. Morrow has since volunteered in various capacities aiding prisoners, including teaching in a men's pre-release unit for one year and ongoing volunteer activities
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with the Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative, which awarded her the 2008 Volunteer of the Year Award. Morrow and her husband reside in Maryland. She will donate her royalties to prisoner rehabilitation programs.

Legislative Updates

- **Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative – SB.172**

Walter Lomax's refrain, "Never Give In - Never Give Up", paid off in the Maryland 2011 Legislature with the passage of SB.172.

Walter was wrongly convicted of a 1967 crime and spent nearly 40 years in Maryland prisons until his case was reopened and he was released. He vowed that he would not forget the men that remained and he has not. As director of the Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative (MRJI), Walter now advocates for humane sentencing policies for those serving long sentences. One of his first initiatives was to change Maryland's policy for paroling lifers.

Maryland was one of only three states which gave the Governor of the state the sole power to reject recommendations that lifers be released from prison, effectively making it a political decision rather than accepting the parole board recommendations. With the passage of SB.172 this year, the Governor has 180 days to reject the recommendation to release a person serving a parole-eligible life sentence. If he does not act within that time period, then the person will be released. While this piece of legislation doesn't do everything that so many people worked so hard to support, it truly is an unprecedented first step toward removing the governor from the parole process entirely.

- **Establishment of the National Criminal Justice Commission - Sen. Webb (S.306)**

In February 2011, Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va) reintroduced his landmark National Criminal Justice Commission Act which would have created a bipartisan commission of experts charged with undertaking an 18 month top to bottom review of the nation's criminal justice system with the goal of offering concrete recommendations for reform. The bill was first introduced in 2009 and was passed in the House but the Senate blocked it. This year, again the Senate failed to pass this bill.

National Organizations from across the spectrum have supported this bill including the International Association of Chiefs of Police, NAACP, Fraternal Order of Police, American Civil Liberties Union and the Sentencing Project just to name a few. The facts are that America spends a staggering \$68 billion a year just to keep

people locked up and has the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Sen. Webb lamented the decline in bipartisan behavior even in serious matters as this bill which should not even be considered as controversial.

"We are not done. ...We are going to continue to pursue ways to get this commission enacted, to get the advice and debate that is needed to fix the broken points in our criminal justice system, so that we can again have a criminal justice system that holds people accountable when they need to be held accountable."

Charlie Sullivan of CURE USA said progress was made; debate was "vigorous" and that even opponents said "There were 'good things' in the idea of a commission."

- **Retroactive application of Fair Sentencing Act**

The US Sentencing Commission (USSC) voted unanimously in 2010 to implement the retroactive application of the Fair Sentencing Act, which brings the sentences for crack cocaine more in line for those of powder cocaine. The retroactive sentencing went into effect on November 1, 2011. Hundreds of federal crack cocaine prisoners began walking out of prison on Tuesday Nov 1, the first beneficiaries of the decision to apply retroactive sentencing. As many as 1,800 prisoners are eligible for immediate release and up to 12,000 will be eligible for sentence reductions that will shorten their stay behind bars.

There is still some confusion over how many people will be released and what the time frame might be. Despite the uncertainty, activists, newly freed prisoners, and family members greeted the event with elation.

It took years of effort due, in part, to efforts by reform advocates who decried the evident racial and economic disparities in the prosecution of crack cocaine cases. The Sentencing Commission has also fought for over a decade urging Congress to fix the law. This only affects federal crack offenders who were convicted in federal court.

FAMM, Families Against Mandatory Minimums worked for many years in the fight to reform crack cocaine disparity in sentencing. Their site has the following suggestion if you are a federal prisoner who might be impacted:

For legal help, contact the Federal Public Defender's Office in the district where the conviction took place or contact the lawyer who helped you at sentencing.

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Contact info for public defenders can be found at http://www.fd.org/pdf_lib/defenderdir.pdf
If the public defender can't help, the prisoner can write to the court that did the sentencing and ask the court to appoint an attorney to help with the request. Courts can be located at <http://www.uscourts.gov/courtlinks>

MD State Commission on Criminal Sentencing



The Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy annual public comments session will be held Tuesday Dec 13, 2011 in the Judiciary Committee Hearing Room of the House Office Building in Annapolis. The Commission works to increase equity in sentencing by reducing disparity in sentencing. <http://www.msccsp.org/>

This is an opportunity to bring any sentencing related issue to the attention of the Commission. Anyone intending to speak will need to submit written testimony at least three days in advance. Contact dsoule@umd.edu

Maryland CURE President Lea Green will be speaking out in support of the Second Chance Act.

The Second Chance Act has dramatically changed the way state and local leaders think about prisoner reentry and is demonstrating how we can reduce recidivism. Continued funding is critical and Maryland CURE has been actively supportive of this. The bill was passed in 2008 with overwhelming bipartisan support and authorizes \$165 million for programs that will improve coordination of reentry services and policies at the state, tribal, and local levels, including demonstration grants, reentry courts, family-centered programs, substance abuse treatment, employment, mentoring and other services needed to improve transition from prison and jail to communities and reduce recidivism.

Over 250 Second Chance grants have been awarded to community and faith-based organizations as well as state, local and tribal governments. Although \$165 million is authorized, funding must be approved each year and this year, on Nov 11, a report was released showing a consolidated appropriations bill for several agencies including the Department of Justice providing \$63 million for the Second Chance Act. This bill is expected to go to the full House and Senate for consideration this week and may be passed by the time our newsletter has been printed.

Anyone who would like to attend the Sentencing Commission is welcome! If you could attend just to show your support it could be a powerful statement alone.

Contact Lea Green at marylandcure@comcast.net if you can come and be supportive. Presence is powerful!

Maryland Inmates Produce Weekly Closed-Circuit Newscast

Inmates at Maryland Correctional Training Center (MCTC) in Hagerstown produce a closed-circuit weekly news broadcast for their fellow 2,000 prisoners, reports the Washington Post. The newscasts put a modern spin on a jailhouse journalism tradition that dates to the 19th century.

Because the Internet is banned in Maryland prisons, wardens encouraged the newscasts to save money on copying thousands of monthly newsletters. They are recorded with personal video cameras more often used by tourists on cruises. There are segments on victims' rights, sports, prison rules, health, religion, phone calls, books, legal decisions, the chow hall, and watercolor painting. Some shows are simulcast in Spanish. Some programs clear up rumors that could cause tension with guards. One popular segment: "Life for Lifers."

The newscasts, with approval by the warden, are beamed to cells, where inmates watch on TVs housed in clear casings to prevent the hiding of contraband. (TVs are allowed in most state prison cells, but not federal.) There is usually one newscast at the end of the week, although the anchors can break in midweek if news warrants.

Maryland CURE Meeting Schedule

Saturday, Jan 28, 2012
Saturday Mar 17, 2012
Saturday Jun 16, 2012
Saturday, Sep 15, 2012
10:00 AM – 11:30 AM

Howard County Library Central Br.
10375 Little Patuxent Pkwy.
Columbia, MD 21044

NOTE: MD CURE meetings are generally scheduled quarterly on the third Saturday of the month.

Post Office Box 23
Simpsonville, MD 21150

marylandcure@comcast.net
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What is CURE?

Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE) is a grassroots organization that was founded in Texas in 1972. It became a national organization in 1985.

We believe that prisons should be used only for those who absolutely must be incarcerated and that those who are incarcerated should have all of the resources they need to turn their lives around. We also believe that human rights documents provide a sound basis for ensuring that criminal justice systems meet these goals.

CURE is a National Organization and has state chapters of which Maryland is one.

We are a voice in the advocacy of criminal justice reform in Maryland and we partner with likeminded organizations.

We don't need a lot of money to operate the state chapter as we are all volunteers but there are some expenses so we are asking our members to make a small contribution. Please cut and mail the membership form beside this and give as you can.

A heartfelt thanks from Maryland CURE

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" – Martin Luther King Jr

**Membership in
Maryland CURE**

Name _____

Street Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

E-mail _____

Annual Dues (January – December)

___ Prisoner \$2 (or 5 stamps)

___ Individual \$10

___ Family \$15

___ Life \$100

___ I cannot pay any of the above dues but please accept my contribution in the following amount _____

___ Please place my name on your mailing list as a non-member. Enclosed is a \$5 donation to cover printing and mailing costs

Make checks payable to: Maryland CURE

Send payments to:

Maryland CURE

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Simpsonville, MD 21150

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