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SELF-GOVERNMENT ON A COUNTY PRISON FARM

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SELF-GOVERNMENT ON A COUNTY PRISON FARM

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A brief description of the organization of the Department of Public Welfare of Westchester County, New York, is necessary to an understanding of the work of one of its divisions, the Westchester County Penitentiary. The Department has six divisions: the Department of Hospitals and Health, with its 525-bed hospital, the County Home, the County Penitentiary with 300 cells, the Department of Child Welfare, the County Farm, and the Central Purchasing Agency. The county owns a 530-acre tract of land on which all of the divisions of the Department are located except that of Child Welfare, which has its headquarters at the county seat, White Plains, some seven miles distant from the institutions. The County Home, the Hospital, and the Prison are so situated as to be out of sight of each other and have different highways. Three railroad stations are about equally distant from these three institutions. Each division has its own executive officer, and there is no connection between any of the divisions except through the central office of the commissioner.

Because of the physical location of the various institutions, the penitentiary plays a very important part in the economical administration of the Department. The prisoners are employed on the farm, in the dairy, and in the central heating plant. They do all the rough construction work, such as making roads, grading, constructing the smaller buildings, and most of the repairing and general upkeep of all the institutions. In consequence the prison is an asset to the county instead of a liability. This result is possible, however, only because of the spirit and type of paid employes in charge of the prison, and the co-operation of the prisoners' self-governing organization, the Effort League.

The Department has always held the opinion that a prison

should not be merely a custodial institution or a place of punishment, but should be a training school, and that a prison administration is a failure that does not return its wards to society better men because of their experiences in prison. To accomplish this it is necessary first to secure a warden who has faith in humanity, who has strength of character and ideals combined with freedom from mere sentimentality, and who has courage and infinite patience. In addition, he must have a staff of guards with a real interest in, and an understanding of, the principles for which the administration stands, and a feeling of personal responsibility for the prisoners under them. It requires a big type of man to be able to develop the right spirit in a self-governing body of prisoners; but when prisoners and prison staff work together for a common purpose the usual difficulties and annoyances of prison administration disappear, and in their place come harmony, cheer, mutual respect, and fine order and discipline.

In trying for these results in Westchester we first secured our warden, and then a staff of guards, no one of whom had ever before had any connection with a prison, and all of whom were either experienced farmers or skilled mechanics. Even with this unusually fine type of guard we found it had a deteriorating moral effect if they merely stood around and watched the prisoners work. We therefore soon required that the guards become working foremen of their gangs of prisoners, except where we knew there were dangerous or new and untried men in the gang. It is upon this kind of a working staff that we have depended for the carrying out of our methods. Such a staff is essential, for self-government is one of our principles, and self-government among prisoners will never succeed if tried as an experiment, nor unless the warden and guards have sufficiently strong personalities to establish and maintain a sound co-operative spirit among the men.

The system of management of our penitentiary is of two kinds, that of the administrative staff and that of the self-governing body of prisoners. A knowledge of the administrative side is essential to an understanding of the work of the Effort League. The prisoners are divided into four classes: A, B, C, and D, A being the highest class. Upon admission every prisoner is placed in class C, and whether he is advanced to the higher

classes or is demoted depends entirely upon his own conduct. In each of the three highest classes a prisoner has an opportunity of earning a certain number of credits a day: in class A from 9 to 10, in class B from 7 to 8, and in class C from 5 to 6. In class D a man has no opportunity of earning credits, but must win promotion to a higher class in order to gain this privilege. Credits may be earned in two ways, either by individual merit or by the good conduct of the group. Every man is assigned to a group, and his progress is dependent not only upon his own actions but upon the action of every member of his group. To illustrate, each man receives individual credits for the condition of his own cell, for his own work, and so forth, but he loses his group credits if the general conduct is unsatisfactory in the corridors, dining room, assembly hall, or ball field, or if any member of his gang loafs or tries to escape. The real purpose of this group credit is to make the man easily understand the interrelation between himself and society. Many prisoners are too individualistic and recognize no law but their own desires. Their group credits help to convince them that no individual in modern society can stand alone, but that each is seriously affected either for good or evil by the conduct of those around him.

No man is compelled to work, but each is told that unless he is willing to render service to the best of his ability he is entitled to only a bare subsistence. If he does not wish to work he is left in his cell and given a restricted diet. He has practically no contact with other prisoners, and naturally, not being a member of the Effort League, has none of its privileges. He remains in class D and so receives no credits. We have had few men who cared to remain under these disadvantages for more than the first few days they have been in prison. Those that have tried it even for a short time have always come out the strongest advocates of work and have had a powerful moral influence upon their fellow prisoners. Of course, as part of the regular system, care is always taken that a man is not assigned to work beyond his physical capacity.

The warden holds weekly meetings with all the guards, at which time the problems of individual prisoners are discussed and their promotion or demotion to other classes determined. A guard has power only to assign the number of credits received by a man within the limits of his classification. His demotion or

promotion from his class rests with the warden's conference. In this way a prisoner is protected from hasty punishment by a guard who might have a grudge against him, and both prisoner and guard are assured a fair hearing.

The sentences for which men are sent to the penitentiary range from a minimum of ten days to a maximum of one year and five hundred dollars fine. The fine can be worked off at the rate of one dollar a day. By good behavior this maximum sentence of two years four months and fifteen days may be reduced one month and twenty days. To be valued, credits must be redeemable in something of use to the very short term men, as well as to those with the longer sentences. We have arranged, therefore, that if a man's sentence is for six months or longer his credits may be applied to the shortening of his term; since this is not legally possible in the cases of men sentenced for less than six months, their credits are redeemable in cash at the rate of one cent per credit. In most institutions using a credit system a man is given a certain number of credits and these are reduced when he commits any breach of discipline. With us no credits are given unless earned, but once given are never taken away. If a man abuses his privileges his power to earn credits is reduced by his demotion to a lower class, or is taken away entirely if he falls into class D. The amount of cash earned by a prisoner in six months may seem small, but it will at least give a penniless vagrant enough money to maintain himself for a few days or a week after his discharge. When a homeless man is turned out of prison without enough money for a meal or a night's lodging, how can society expect him to become instantly self-supporting? Almost his only alternative is to return to prison.

The method of classification and rewards followed in Westchester is not dependent upon any form of self-government, and can be used in the ordinary form of prison management. It is, however, a most important factor in building up a feeling of self-respect among the prisoners, and in giving them a real incentive for good behavior. It compels them eventually to work out their own salvation and thus contributes toward a regaining of self-respect. It aids tremendously in producing a right attitude of mind in a man. It appeals to his sense of justice, for, in view of the fact that every physically fit prisoner works eight hours a day on constructive labor for the county, he is entitled

to some pay for his efforts. Moreover, the system works so automatically that the prisoner feels that he is not subject to the arbitrary power of the guard, but sees clearly that his advancement is due directly to his own conduct.

So much for the administrative setting with which the prisoners' self-governing association, the Effort League, co-operates. Upon admission to the penitentiary, each prisoner first has a personal interview with the warden, who explains to him the method of administration of the institution and what is expected of him. He is then interviewed by a committee of the League, which explains to him its purposes and regulations, the advantages of membership, and what he must do to qualify as a member. Membership in the League is open to every prisoner after a trial period of ten days, provided he has proved himself worthy. The League is responsible for the conduct and order of all prisoners in the dining room, assembly hall, corridors, recreation room, and cell blocks, this meaning practically all order within the penitentiary, and also on the baseball field; no guards are stationed in any of these places. In addition, it has extensive powers of recommendation to the warden. No man is allowed outside the building, even as a member of a gang with a guard, without the League's recommendation. It also recommends as trusties all men who work as assistants to the butcher, as dairymen, teamsters, carpenters, bakers, and painters. Some men are recommended as trusties to be used as foremen in charge of other gangs of prisoners. The teamsters cart all freight from the railroad station, two miles distant, and do most of the carting on the property. The firemen at the central heating plant change shifts day and night without guards, and are held from running away merely by their loyalty to the League. Many times the League has suspected a trusty of planning to escape, and has requested the warden to remove him from his trusted post and to assign him to duties within the building or to place him in a gang under a guard. At present seven prisoners are repainting the interior of a large dormitory at the County Home. The building is two miles from the prison and very near the railroad station, but they are in charge of a trusty. Every Saturday and Sunday afternoon all members of the League in good standing, which means generally 90 per cent of our population, are permitted

to play baseball in an open field some 500 yards from the prison without guards in attendance.

Our figures regarding escapes tell whether League members abuse their power of recommendation or take advantage of the freedom allowed them. The Effort League has been in operation almost as long as the prison has been open—some thirty-nine months. During these months one prisoner has escaped while under the League's control, while 14 have escaped from gangs in charge of guards, this in an average population of 130, of whom at least 15 per cent are working alone with complete freedom or in charge of other prisoners. It must also be remembered that a guard working as a foreman of a gang of from six to ten prisoners on the farm or in the woods or constructing roads cannot always have his eye on every prisoner. We are not as interested in whether we lose three or four additional prisoners a year as we are in what we can accomplish for the other 125 that remain with us. It is the greatest good for the greatest number that we consider our problem. Nevertheless, we believe the number of escapes from the Westchester County Penitentiary compares favorably with those from similar penal institutions. When an escape has occurred it is our invariable rule to leave no stone unturned to capture the prisoner, and when he is found, to have the county judge impose the full penalty of the law for his escape. No mitigating circumstances are recognized in an attempt to escape. Some men have been gone for months, but only two of the 15 who have escaped are still unfound.

The League officers are: a president, a vice-president, a judge of the inmate court, a sergeant-at-arms, a public defender, and a secretary, all elected for a term of four months by popular vote. These officers form the cabinet and make all recommendations to the warden. The cabinet forms the link between the administration and the prison population. During the thirty-nine months the League has functioned only three officers have been impeached, two sergeants-at-arms for not keeping order, and one public defender for obtaining the acquittal of those whom the prisoners knew were at least morally if not technically guilty of the offense charged against them. Would that our bar associations in the world outside the prison were always as resentful of acquittals unjustly secured by their members!

The prisoners' court is one of the most important parts of the

League's machinery. A prisoner may be brought before the court on the complaint of another prisoner or of any prison official. If a guard has a complaint to make of a member of his gang for loafing or insubordination, he takes it to the prisoners' court. The court may sentence a man to from one to five days in the isolation cells, may deprive him of all League privileges for a fixed period, may assign him extra work to be done during recreation hours, and may even expel him from the League which automatically carries with it reduction to class D. It has been found necessary to limit the severity of the court's sentences, and the maximum sentence has been placed at expulsion from the League, together with five days in a cell on limited diet. Expulsion from the League means that the offender is turned over to the warden for discipline. He is then separated from the other prisoners and loses all privileges. In other words, the League excludes offenders from its social organization. If a man is expelled from the League he can, by a period of good behavior satisfactory to the League, be re-elected and start in class C and by continued merit work up to class A. The probation system, which was put into operation by the Effort League over six months ago, has proved very successful. First offenders are usually placed on probation for five or ten days and must report regularly to the probation officer assigned to his case by the judge of the inmate court.

The organization of the League is simple, but its educational value to both the prison authorities and the prisoners is profound. Most men are sent to prison because they have lost their self-control at a critical moment or because they are too individualistic and have little regard for the property or rights of others. In other words, they have not realized the interrelation between themselves and society. Under the self-governing system they have an opportunity to acquire self-control, and they soon realize that a disorderly or wilful person within their midst is detrimental to them all and one not to be tolerated at large in their prison community. They can then be easily shown that what is true in their prison society is equally true in the larger social contacts outside, and that their treatment of offenders against the League laws is the same as that which society was compelled to take against them individually and for the same reasons. How can a man's character be strengthened if he is

deprived of the opportunity to exercise self-control, and how can he be better fitted to live in a normal community if he is kept for long periods in entirely artificial surroundings that have no relation to conditions in the world at large?

The success of the Effort League in Westchester is the more surprising for two reasons: first, because of the short term for which prisoners are sentenced, averaging, for the past eighteen months, four months and twenty-two days, and secondly, because of the interruption in its work during the war when the Federal Government took possession of the prison buildings for a year. This necessitated a complete second start with a partially new staff and the creation for the second time of a sound public opinion among the prisoners. The success of self-government in prisons is just as dependent upon the public opinion created among the men as it is in the world outside. It is a matter of education, just as it is in normal society. Do not imagine that a warden can go to his prisoners and say, "Here is self-government—take it." He must have unlimited faith and must be a leader of men. He must begin by granting a limited but, so far as it goes, a real self-government. Then, as his guards understand the principle and the prisoners learn to take responsibility, he can enlarge its scope. Let me repeat, there can be no suspicion of sham or insincerity on the part of the administration, for that is immediately detected by the men and is fatal to the plan. The self-government as far as it goes must be complete. Better put too narrow limits on self-government but have it genuine within those limits than have wider limits with reservations.

The administration officials must not expect perfection from self-government. We have not yet attained it in the world at large. Difficult situations will arise and individual failures will occur. When the principle fails, it is for the lack of real leadership upon the part of the administrative officials, just as self-government everywhere fails without wise political leaders. Human nature is the same everywhere and responds to a greater or lesser degree to the same stimuli according to the individual. The same qualities count toward leadership among prisoners as among our free citizens.

We make no claim that the exact form of self-government used in Westchester can be applied to all penal institutions. I

do firmly believe, however, that the principle with wise modifications to suit each institution is the best method for developing the self-respect and character of the prisoner. A man leaves prison either better or worse as a result of his confinement. It is evident that he will not be better unless he has learned to live law abidingly under conditions similar to those in the world outside, and he cannot be educated to do this unless he learns to meet and overcome the same temptations he will find outside. Whether our wards have learned by their experiences to adjust better to outside life is shown by the fact that out of the 1,732 prisoners received in thirty-nine months, only 143 have been returned, and of this number 108 were returned for intoxication. It is well known that alcoholism cannot be cured by short terms in prison.

In concluding, let me again emphasize that the success or failure of all systems of governing men depends, first, upon the education and development of a sound public opinion, and secondly, upon the vision and wisdom of the responsible leaders.

If the experience of Westchester County can be of assistance to other communities, the Department of Public Welfare is at their service.