

Prison system needs culture change

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

What happens behind bars in the jails and prisons of this nation doesn't stay there. It trickles out into the community. Every year, 13.5 million people — a disproportionate number of them African-American — pass through our nation's prisons and jails, with a vast majority — 95 percent — eventually re-entering society.

Some leave their periods of incarceration as hardened criminals anxious to return to a life of crime. Others do not. In the 1990s, harsher punishments for drug crimes fueled the current prison population boom. And in light of the FBI's recent announcement that violent crime was up 2.5 percent in 2005, the problem isn't likely to go away anytime soon.

In our nation's efforts to "get tough on crime," we've lost some of our compassion for our fellow man. We've let cynicism undermine our hope that rehabilitation is possible for all people — no matter how dastardly their deeds.

All human beings deserve a modicum of respect and dignity; however, in our nation's prisons, you really have to wonder if that standard is being upheld.

Inhumane conditions — driven by overcrowding, financial woes and understaffing have pushed some prisons to the boiling point. They're not places where prisoners have a decent chance at rehabilitation. They are places where criminals become better and more violent criminals.

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would withdraw our funds from them.

This model works. Collective Banking Group President Jonathan Weaver is a visionary and activist. I ask again: Why are there not more CBG chapters across this country? Go figure.

I concluded my speech at the event by introducing a concept I have written about before: "The Boycott Prisons Campaign," which was initially shared with me by Nathan Hare. I held up the bumper stickers and campaign flyers to a rousing applause and shouts of "Amen!"

As I took my seat, Pastor Weaver said, "It sure would be great if that slogan was on a tee-shirt; this will make a great national awareness marketing campaign."

I reached into my bag and pulled out my Boycott Prisons tee-shirt, and the campaign began, right there at the CBG conference.

Pastor Weaver held up the shirt and members of various churches immediately signed up for tee-shirt orders. Pastor Weaver and the CBG are determined to spread this message far and wide in an effort to turn our youth — and some of our old folks, too — away from the criminal "injustice" system and toward positive alternatives, such as business ownership and higher education. I was overwhelmed at the show of support by the conferees.

I have written about the model group many times. I even put a chapter about the CBG in my last book. I have also written about the Boycott Prisons Campaign and introduced it to other organizations during my speeches. Now you are reading about them, either for the first time or once again. What are you going to do?

Once you know better, you should do better — or no better for you. We must take

Mind you, corrections is a tough profession and a poorly understood one. Corrections officers often work long shifts in tense, overcrowded facilities without enough backup, support or training. Many wardens run aging and understaffed facilities and deal with a workforce in which experienced officers are likely to leave the profession for better-paying, less-stressful jobs just when they're ready to become good mentors for new recruits.

These pressures cause stress, injury and illness among the prison workforce, and stress contributes to a dangerous culture inside. The tension is further exacerbated by racial and cultural differences.

Because the exercise of power is an important part of a corrections officer's job, it's natural that in situations where staff who are under stress, inexperienced and lack training are more likely to abuse their power.

In prisons where the culture has devolved, rules aren't enforced, prisoner-on-prisoner violence is tolerated and antagonistic relationships can erupt into overt hostility and physical violence.

In the 1960s in my home state of Louisiana, the maximum-security state penitentiary in Angola had a reputation for being "America's bloodiest prison."

I don't know what prison carries that dis-

economic models that work and replicate them. Forget who gets the credit; it's about who gets the benefit. The beneficiaries of our work will be our children. Don't they deserve something more from us than rhetoric? I think so, and I know that by working collectively, Black people can build an economic legacy and foundation upon which our children can stand.

I encourage you to contact the CBG and get a chapter started in your city. I encourage you to start a Boycott Prisons Campaign, and begin the de-programming process among our youth. They are bombarded with negative self-defeating messages from the media everyday, but we can use the same strategy to reverse their downward spiral by creating our own messages, our own marketing campaigns. Contact me for information on how to start your Boycott Prisons Campaign.

The power of the collective awaits us. It beckons us to do more, for and among ourselves, to save our children and us. Sure, there are individuals among us who are doing quite well, but imagine the exponential power of their resources combined with many others. You don't have to be affluent to be a part of an economic collective, though. The Blackonomics Million Dollar Club is an effort that anyone can join, and, through our individual donations, some small some large, we can make significant improvements in Black organizations and causes that need financial assistance. Go to my website www.blackonomics.com for more information.

There are many ways you can contribute to the power of the Black collective. I have given you three examples. Get busy.

James E. Clingman is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati's African American Studies Department.



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tion today, but I can say with some confidence that it is no longer Angola. While reforms began decades ago, the most dramatic changes occurred over the past 10 years as the prison's fundamental institutional culture was profoundly transformed.

Prisoners at Angola are treated with dignity and respect by everyone who works

there and prisoners are expected to reciprocate that treatment. Prisoners have been given hope through education and morally based programming, and they gain responsibility through meaningful employment. The fair and reliable enforcement of the rules by staff and prisoners means less violence.

For the past 15 months, I have served as part of the 20-member bipartisan Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons. We have visited prisons all over the nation and listened to experts — in search of ways to make prisons safer not only for staff but also inmates — and in turn — our society at large.

We recently released a report called Confronting Confinement that highlights a wide array of dangerous conditions surrounding incarceration — violence, poor health care, inappropriate segregation, lack of political

support for labor and management, weak oversight of correctional facilities, and lack of reliable data on violence and abuse rates.

Of 30 practical reforms recommended, we called for expanding the capacity of the National Institute of Corrections to effect positive institutional culture change.

The NIC already has a very promising program in place — the Institutional Culture Initiative that provides tools and training to prison staff to change the culture of their institutions. The program helps them learn to resolve conflict through communication — particularly across cultural and racial differences rather than violence.

In an era when everyone seems to want to "get tough on crime," I realize that institutional "culture change" sounds like a soft approach. Overwhelmingly, our commission heard that when one changes the culture, one changes the entire institution.

Prisons that add punishment on top of the sentence will be violent places. Prisons that treat prisoners with basic human dignity and respect are more likely to be places where violence and abuse are the rare exception and not the rule.

Let Angola serve as a positive role model for prison reform. If profound culture change is possible in Angola, it is possible anywhere.

Marc H. Morial is president and CEO of the National Urban League.

Supreme Court cases could undermine desegregation

By Hazel Trice Edney
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DETROIT (NNPA) - Two new cases to be considered in the fall by the U.S. Supreme Court endangers desegregation in elementary and secondary public schools across the nation, civil rights activists warned during the annual summer conference of the National Newspaper Publishers Association.

"This could set us farther back than Plessy v. Ferguson," said Shanta Driver, national Co-chair of BAMN, By Any Means Necessary, the Michigan-based group that led a march and rally of 50,000 outside the Supreme Court during the University of Michigan Affirmative Action cases that resulted in the reaffirmation of affirmative action in higher education.

"I feel that we have a tremendous opportunity facing us," Driver said. "This nation is becoming increasingly polarized. The right wing is prepared again and again and again to overreach. They've given us an opportunity to build a new civil rights movement to stand together and fight and take back what we have lost in the last period of time because of our inability to mobilize."

Driver and other activists

pleaded with publishers and associates to get the word out about the continued attacks on affirmative action around the country, including in Michigan where Black conservative Ward Connerly has pushed through a referendum for a ballot in November that would allow voters to ban affirmative action.

A report by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission says Connerly's so-called Michigan Civil Rights Initiative obtained its petition signatures fraudulently by misleading people into thinking they were signing to hold a referendum for affirmative action.

"We need your help. We need your help," Hester Wheeler, executive director of the Detroit NAACP told the breakfast audience. "Lots of education is required on this particular issue. Six to \$8 million are required... Those of you who work in media and press, we need your help. We can win on this particular issue. We're going to beat them at the polls in November," he said, "We can not mislead people to think that this particular issue will somehow fade."

Audience members eagerly received educational flyers on the Connerly issue, handed out by about a dozen

youth that accompanied Driver. But, the upcoming Supreme Court cases took center stage as Driver vowed to mobilize thousands to march on Washington like three years ago.

The two pending cases, Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District and Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education (Kentucky), are expected to be heard in the fall. In each case, the school programs before the court were upheld as constitutional by federal appeals courts.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in the Jefferson County case and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in the Seattle case, ruled that the programs did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, meaning that race may be considered in the placement of students.

An adverse ruling by the reconstituted court could have the affect of overturning the desegregation mandates set forth in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.

"The Court's ruling in these cases will have far reaching implications for the future of the nation's (See Court, Page 13)