

# CITIZENS FOR PRISON REFORM NEWSLETTER

## May 2019

More information can be obtained by searching for the bold headings on the internet. If you wish to be added to, or removed from, the mailing list for the newsletter, contact Frank Dennis (fgdennis@msu.edu).

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### **Books, Articles, Notes**

**Woodfox, Alfred. 2019. Solitary: Unbroken by four decades in solitary confinement. My story of transformation and hope.** Grove Press, New York, NY. Woodfox grew up in New Orleans, a child of a broken home and son of a poor mother, and began committing petty crimes at an early age. In prison, he met a survivor of the Black Panther Party, and made a commitment to the principles it espoused. While he was serving a 50-year sentence for armed robbery in Angola prison, a white prison guard was killed, and the crime was blamed on Woodfox and another member of the Black Panthers. The two prisoners were placed in solitary confinement. Their subsequent trial was a farce, with no real evidence being presented by the prosecutor, and both men were given life sentences in solitary confinement. The book describes the shabby treatment the men received, and their long incarceration in 6 X 9 foot cells 23 hours per day, despite the support of several organizations, dedicated lawyers and Sen. John Conyers of Michigan, who called for re-trials. Brief excerpts from these trials illustrate the lies prosecutors employed in pressing their case. Woodfox was finally released, after spending 46 years in solitary confinement, by pleading nolo contendere to manslaughter. (See also *How Alfred Woodfox Survived Solitary*. By Rachel Aviv, *The New Yorker Magazine*, January 16, 2017)

**Dewan, Shaila. The Violence of Prison: A Rare, and Troubling, Look Behind the Walls. Notoriously Rough Facility in Alabama.** The New York Times recently received over 2000 photographs believed to have been taken in the St. Clair Correctional Facility in Alabama, including photos of injured and nude men, indignity, and gore. Few of them could be published but could be described. These photos were given to the *Times* by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which received them on a thumb drive. Alabama's prisons are overcrowded, understaffed and antiquated. A contraband search at St. Clair recovered 167 makeshift weapons. The state has one of highest incarceration and prison homicide rates in the U.S., despite requests for more funds for staffing and salaries, and lawsuits brought by the SPLC and the Equal Justice Initiative. (*The New York Times*, March 31, 2019) See also **What's in the DOJ's scathing report on Alabama prisons**, by Rebecca Oh in *The Nation*, April 4, 2019)

**If Prisons Aren't the Answer, What Is ?** By Emily Bazelon. A survey conducted by the ACLU in 2018 revealed that 59 % of respondents would be more likely to support than to oppose a candidate who supports reducing the prison population. Congress recently passed by a large majority the First Step Act, that reduces some drug sentences and improve prison conditions. There appears to be agreement that the system is broken, but little agreement on how it can be fixed. Bazelon proposes

changes in the bail system, which is based on the wealth of the accused, including pretrial release for misdemeanors and some felonies. She notes that 524 persons were jailed in Texas in 2018 for not paying traffic fines. Many “violent felonies,” such as purse snatching, involve no violence. Many life sentences should be commuted to shorter terms, and incarceration should be a last resort, not the default. (*The New York Times*, April 7, 2019.) (Bazelon’s views are covered in depth in her book *Charged: The New Movement to Transform American Prosecution and End Mass Incarceration*, which includes an appendix “Twenty-One Principles for Twenty-First Century Prosecutors”)

**Contora, Andre. Teaching in America’s prisons has taught me to believe in second chances.** Contora is an assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Baltimore, and directs the University’s Second Chance College Program, a part of the U.S. Department of Education’s Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative. She describes her contacts with prisoners who are eager to learn – to get a GED, to read books, to engage in self-education – and how education changes how they view themselves and their future. Contora lists some of positive benefits of prison education programs – increased opportunities for employment, higher earnings, financial benefits. They also reduce recidivism; prisoners who participate in post-secondary education programs are 43 % less likely to return to prison. The newly passed First Step Act is expected to increase funds for vocational programming for federal prisoners, but it does not lift the ban on Pell Grants for them. (<https://theconversation.com/teaching-in-americas-prisons-has-taught-me-to-believe-in-second-chances-11253>)

**‘The Redemption Project’: Convicts, Victims, Confrontation and Forgiveness.** By Van Jones. A powerful new series about restorative justice, bringing together offenders and their victims. During eight episodes Jones interacts with victims of violent crimes who have agreed to meet with the convicts who shattered their lives. Factors involved include drugs, religion, forgiveness and guilt. The encounters seek to put a human face on both sides of the crime, seeking reparation and atonement beyond anything achievable by the institutions of the law. The series premieres on CNN Sunday, 9 p.m. (ET/PT) April 28. [www.ncregister.com/daily-news-the-redemption-project-convicts-victims-confrontation-and-forgivness](http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news-the-redemption-project-convicts-victims-confrontation-and-forgivness).

**Gov. Whitmer Launches Initiative to Improve Jail and Pretrial System by Executive Order.** On April 17, the Governor signed Executive Order 2019-10 to form the Michigan Task Force on Jail and Pretrial Incarceration. The Task Force will start a bipartisan review of the State’s jail and court data to expand alternatives to jail, safely reduce jail admissions and length of stay, and improve the effectiveness of Michigan’s justice system. The Task Force will be co-chaired by Chief Justice Bridget McCormack, and Lt. Gov. Garlin Gilchrist. Members will include representatives nominated by the Senate, the House of Representatives, the governor and a number of organizations involved in criminal justice. The task force will address the rise in the prison population over the last 35 years, the longer sentences being given, the high percentage of prisoners who are awaiting trial, and the inability of poor people to raise money for bail.

**Lawsuit: Detroit's 36<sup>th</sup> district court violates defendants' rights with cash bail.** By Sarah Cwick. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed a federal class action suit regarding bond hearings before this court, claiming that they are cursory, many taking place via video conference and lasting less than 5 minutes. As a result, about 85 % of the defendants must pay cash bail, and an estimated 60 % of the prisoners in Wayne County's jails at any given time are awaiting trial. The suit also seeks a permanent injunction preventing the county sheriff from holding pre-trial detainees in jail unless bail hearings have been held. In support of its suit, the ACLU notes that Washington, D.C. has eliminated cash bail and releases 90 % of pretrial defendants, yet 90 % of those released show up for court dates. Inability to pay bail can lead to loss of jobs, housing, and/or custody of children, as well as guilty pleas by innocent defendants. (Michigan Radio [wuomfm.com](http://www.wuomfm.com), npr) See also: Coming Events below. <https://www.aclumich.org/en/news/we-sued-end-evils-cash-bail-michigan>

**What happened to the Brooklyn jail is part of a deeper human right crisis.** By Bonnie Kerness. The electricity and heat were off in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn for a period of time recently, but the neglect that led to this crisis continues throughout the country. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) continues to hear, from prisoners and their families throughout the U.S., how prisons isolate immigrants, serve poor quality food, lack appropriate physical and psychological medical care, and neglect the elderly and youth. In the same week of the crisis in Brooklyn, arsenic was found in the water in a federal prison in Atlanta Ga. A letter from a state prison in New Jersey reported that the facility was "a place for inmates that are very sick and waiting to die," and that those who were unable to get out of bed lay in their own wastes. Similar situations are recorded in other prisons. To learn more about the experiences of others in prison, you are advised to visit the AFSC Prison Watch page. <https://www.afsc.org/category/topic/prison-watch>.

For additional articles , see the web page of the Vera Institute, <https://www.vera.org/research>,

## **Coming events**

**February 1 → May 19, 2019. States of Incarceration.** This exhibit, put together by Rutgers University, is currently on display at the Michigan History Museum, 702 W. Kalamazoo St., in Lansing. It includes a panel about the history of incarceration in Michigan. The program plan includes several movies and discussions. Cost is \$6.

**Saturday, May 4, 1 -3 p.m. Tough Case.** A play by David S. Craig about a 16-year old boy and an elderly widow whose home he has vandalized. In a facilitated restorative justice journey, the widow and the boy decide together how to heal the harm that the boy has done. Would restorative justice improve Michigan's current criminal justice system ? Come and decide for yourself. Sponsored by Friends of Restorative Justice of Washtenaw County and Citizens for Prison Reform. Contact: Kathie at 313-268-6537. Michigan History Museum, 702 W.. Kalamazoo St. Lansing, MI 48915, 517-335-2573.

**Thursday, May 9, 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. – Legislative Advocacy Day.** Action of Greater Lansing -- Statewide Gamaliel of Michigan Coalition. To talk to state legislators about issues concerning our communities – criminal justice reform, education, and water quality. State Capitol, Lansing. Register at <https://forms.gle/MVxvq3YZEg9Y9ppQ6>. Preparation meeting – Monday, May 6, 6-8 p.m., First Presbyterian Church, 510 W. Ottawa St., Lansing.

**Saturday, May 11, ACLU Smart Justice Campaign Launch** to include community partners as participants.n– Anderson Enrichment Center, 125 Ezra Rust Dr., Saginaw, MI 48605; **2 p.m.** – David H. Shepherd Park, 2198 Church St., Oak Park, MI 48237, and NAACP of Grand Rapids, 1530 Madison Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49507; **4 p.m.** – State St. Market, 329 E. State St., Traverse City, MI 49684. For information, contact Rodd Monts ([rmonts@aclu.mich.org](mailto:rmonts@aclu.mich.org)) Sign up at: <https://www.aclumich.org/en/news/we-sued-end-evils-cash-bail-michigan>.

**Saturday, May 18, 10:45 a.m. – 1 p.m. Citizens for Prison Reform Gathering.** Rodd Monts of ACLU will show how families can best address legislators and elected officers. Calvary Lutheran Church, 6301 W. Saint Joseph Hwy., Lansing, MI 48917.

**Sunday, May 19, 5 – 8 p.m. Healing Justice, by Dr. Shaki Butler** – film screening and discussion. The film explores the causes and consequences of the current North American justice system and its effect on marginalized communities. It traces the history of violence that has led to our current system, focusing on a personal, interpersonal, community, and generational level. Sponsored by the Committee to End the New Jim Crow, in collaboration with Carlton Evans, member of Racial Equity and Reconciliation Workshop of the Power of We Consortium. Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing, 5509 S. Pennsylvania, Lansing.

**Wednesday, May 29, 9:30 a.m. – 4 p.m. Making Family Inclusion a Priority. Citizens for Prison Reform’s 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Legislative Education Day.** Presentations by legislators and persons representing organizations devoted to improving the criminal justice system and conditions for prisoners and their families, followed by opportunities for meetings with legislators. The program begins with a press conference on the Capitol lawn at 9:30, followed by registration at 10. The keynote speaker at 10:30 will be Cindy Shank, who spent several years in prison separated from her family as a result of unjust and excessive sentencing, and whose story is told in the HBO Documentary *The Sentence*. A free lunch with legislators will follow. Attendees will have an opportunity to speak with their representatives from 1 to 4 in the afternoon. [www.mcpr.org](http://www.mcpr.org). (See attached flyer.)

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**Citizens for Prison Reform (CPR).** [www.micpr.org](http://www.micpr.org); [micpr.org@gmail.com](mailto:micpr.org@gmail.com). 269-339-0606. P.O. Box 80414, Lansing, MI 48908. Lois Pullano, President. A grassroots family-run organization whose purpose is to educate, support and unify loved ones of prisoners within the state of Michigan. CPR works to inform legislators and create awareness as to the need for greater prison reforms. All content provided in this newsletter is for informational purposes only. The editor makes no representations as to the accuracy or completeness of any information on this site or found by following any link on it. The editor is not liable for any errors or omissions in this information or for the availability of this information, and will not be liable for any losses, injuries, or damages from the display or use of this information.