

ISSUES FACING
THE INCARCERATED TRANSGENDERED COMMUNITY
IN
THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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This paper was presented at the Ninth National AIDS Update Conference, held in San Francisco, California on March 18, 1997. The term transgender used in this presentation refers to the group of all people who are inclined to cross the gender line. In referring to the transgendered incarcerated community I am including cross dressers, drag queens, drag kings, transsexuals pre and post-op m-f and f-m. Some transsexuals remain pre-op and identify as transsexual. The purpose of this paper is to provide you with an understanding and to help bring to light the health care and psychosocial issues faced by the transgendered incarcerated community within the state prison system of the California Department of Corrections. This paper represents their voice, their perception and their experiences living as a transgendered person " behind bars", behind the prison walls. It is also the objective of this presentation to encourage action to be taken to improve the poor medical care and mental health care transgendered persons experience within correctional settings throughout the United States. The transgendered prisoner experiences discrimination, emotional and physical abuse within the confines of correctional facilities. As health care providers, prison health care reform advocates and to those concerned persons of the plight of the disenfranchised, we must face this issue and begin to take steps to correct this social injustice experienced by our transgendered brothers and sisters.

The data collected for this presentation was qualitative, anecdotal focus group material. The subjects were transgendered m-f. Two focus groups comprised of 10 transgendered incarcerated individuals. Data was also gathered from 33 subject responses to the following research study question: " If you are a transgendered person, please suggest how corrections could better provide for your medical, mental and general care unique to your community ". The study took place in a state prison in California.

I was employed as a social worker for the California Department of Correction for 4.5 years. For 3 years I served the prisoner living with HIV disease at all levels of the spectrum of HIV disease. In my last 1.5 years I served the prisoners who were diagnosed with mental illness. During those 1.5 years I was able to do outreach on my own to the transgendered incarcerated person. I developed a supportive / educative support group for the transgendered prisoner. To my knowledge it was the only group of its kind within the California state prison system. When I got final approval to begin the group all those prisoners who were HIV+ transgendered were denied access to the group. And there was no transgendered specific group offered to the HIV+ transgendered prisoner. During my 4.5 years as a social worker I worked at two state prisons. This provided me the opportunity to witness many incidents of poor health care delivery not just in respect to the transgendered prisoner, but to all those living behind bars. So this presentation not only represents the many voices of the transgendered prisoner but also this presenter's "insiders" perspective.

The following represents a summary of responses from the focus groups and questionnaire:

- * Transgendered individuals living with HIV/AIDS are denied hormones.
- * The transgendered incarcerated community are also denied hormones. A few are given hormones if they received them prior to incarceration. And if they are approved it can take months to receive the hormones.
- * HIV+ and HIV- transgendered are disciplined more harshly than the general population for the same offense.
- * Transgendered prisoners are the only incarcerated prisoners housed in with the HIV prisoners. This places them at risk for HIV infection.
- * Some correctional staff demean, demoralize, humiliate and discriminate against the transgendered community.
- * There is no medical clinic or mental health clinic which is transgender sensitive or specific within the correctional setting.
- * The California Department of Corrections has no policy to address the needs of the transgendered community.
- * Transgendered prisoners are not provided any community resources upon release from prison,(transgender sensitive).
- * HIV transgendered were denied access to the only support group offered to the transgendered community.
- * Transgendered prisoners are not allowed to wear make-up or feminine clothing
- * Many have developed breasts and are not allowed to wear bras.
- * They are strip searched by male correctional officers.

Recommendations

- * Correctional, mental health and other ancillary staff should be required to receive annual training on the bio-psychosocial issues of the transgendered incarcerated community.
- * Correctional facilities should have a transgendered medical clinic and mental health program offering transgendered sensitive clinical services.
- * Facilities should not discipline HIV+ and HIV- transgendered more harshly than the general population for an equal offense and judgments should be monitored by an impartial non-correctional body.
- * The transgendered prisoner should be housed in special units allowed to live their lifestyle within the limits and rules of the facility as is expected of all prison groups.
- * The transgendered prisoner should be provided peer driven and culturally sensitive HIV/STD and other health education.
- * The transgendered prisoner should be allowed to initiate and continue hormone therapy and electrolysis.
- * The transgendered prisoner should be allowed access to clothing, personal items and cosmetics that are appropriate to the gender presentation of that person.
- * Peer education on transgendered psychosocial issues should be provided to the general population of the prison community.
- * The California Department of Corrections needs to develop a formal policy to address the psychosocial issues of the transgendered prisoner, m-f, f-m.
- * Transgendered programs developed within correctional facilities should be monitored through a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) program.

Closing Remarks

The issues addressed in this presentation represent the many voices of the transgendered incarcerated community within a California state prison. The poor health care afforded the transgendered in this one state prison represents a major problem epidemic throughout correctional facilities in the United States of America, at the city, county and state levels.

I will close with a summary from the many voices of the transgendered prisoner.

" We are asking for help from those outside the prison walls; cries for help from within have fallen on deaf ears... We ask that our needs be acknowledged and addressed by the California Department of Corrections... We only ask that we be afforded the same medical and mental health treatment which is available to us outside the prison walls... We just want to be treated with respect and to live our life as we were born to live it... We will not allow the California Department of Corrections to deny who we are... We only ask to be treated with respect and dignity and to be recognized and accepted as one of the many faces of the human family..."