

Coalition meeting on criminal justice process an inspirational one

Mary Ann McGivern | Feb. 13, 2013 NCR Today

The New Southern Strategy Coalition, which works to improve access to employment, housing and benefits for Southerners who have a criminal history, met for two days in early February in Durham, N.C. The topics were reducing barriers to re-entry and supporting front-end drug policy reform.

It was a remarkable two days. The content was rich and detailed and focused on stopping child support payment accruals during incarceration; delaying employer background checks until the end of the interview process rather than immediately rejecting those with felony convictions; and providing employee work certifications; acting to provide harm reduction for drug users. The content was laced with personal storytelling, and the overall background was racism.

There were 75 of us in the room, half black, half white. At a public conversation over lunch the first day, three men, two black and one white, talked about how racism imbues their choices of how to do the work of drug policy reform, how they feel about the limitations racism puts on them, and whether they should break the chains of those limitations. Should we name racism as a cause of the war on drugs when asking legislators to cease and desist that war? Would that help or hurt short-term? Long-term?

It was an amazing conversation for how deep the men went over a 45-minute lunch. And it set a tone.

Everybody in the room understood that on every level of the criminal justice process, racism prevails. Blacks are stopped in traffic and on the street disproportionately to whites. Blacks are searched disproportionately. Prosecutors classify black offenses more stringently than whites; they offer blacks tougher plea deals; judges mete out longer sentences to blacks. Because of the correlation of race and poverty, African-Americans depend much more on the public defender system, which is overworked and underpaid, so they get poor representation. Prisons are placed in white rural areas, far from the prisoners' homes and families. These black men and women are arrested, prosecuted, defended and ultimately guarded mostly by white men. And a recent study by ProPublica demonstrated that presidential pardons are granted to white men four times as frequently as to blacks.

We didn't go back over any of that ground. Instead, we talked about how we felt as we organized, lobbied and filed motions for change. We talked about what we brought to the work and how we counted success. We talked about identifying new leaders, giving younger men and women the tools to work effectively. We talked about what whites lose by the exercise of white privilege, how whites are distanced from the event when we stand aloof or are not included in the storytelling, how we are poorer for our homogeneity.

For blacks, racism is the overriding issue, the most important. It isn't for whites. Should it be? Can it be? Would that be better?

And finally, when should we carry the issues of race to our legislators and into the public sector? Always? When we have the time to place an issue in the context of history? Would talking about race to the people who stand with the status quo help us win the prize or lose it? Or should we simply point out that long sentences are more expensive and do not enhance public safety?

The personal stories of the people working on these issues took my breath away, stories of addiction, incarceration, loss, learning, growth into leadership. It was a distilled island of passion and commitment, far away from the tasks of email and remembering to stop for milk on the way home. The questions we pondered are a matter of judgment in the moment; our two-day conference will inform that judgment far into the future.

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