

Ohio Justice and Policy Center

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://ohiojpc.org/2018/07/24/why-fight-the-symptoms-of-mass-incarceration/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

by [Marais Jacon-Duffy](#) | Jul 24, 2018 | [Blog](#), [Interns](#)

This blog was penned by 2018 OJPC summer intern Erin Phillips, a UC Law student.

Prior to working as a summer intern for the Ohio Justice & Policy Center, I was working as an AmeriCorps VISTA for Athens County Job and Family Services. I worked in the Athens Reentry Program and the work I did truly inspired me and changed my life.

My first day, I met the Program Director. It didn't take long to realize he was the best social worker and most likely best human being I would ever meet. He told me this story; many know it as The Starfish Story adapted from The Star Thrower, by Loren Eiseley.

Once upon a time, there was an old man who used to walk on the beach every morning. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see.

Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often and as he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object and throw it into the sea. The boy came closer and the man called out, Good morning! May I ask what it is that you're doing?

The young boy paused, looked up, and replied Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide washed them up onto the beach and they can't return to the sea by themselves, the boy replied. When the sun gets high, they'll die, unless I throw them back into the water.

The old man replied, But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you won't really be able to make much of a difference.

The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled and said, It made a difference to that one!

I stared at him blankly. I had so many questions. Why didn't the community come together and create some kind of method to save all of the starfish? Maybe they could have used a preventative measure like an ocean net? I asked him these questions and he explained that I had missed the point of the story. The takeaway is: You might not be able to change the entire world, but at least you can change a small part of it, for someone.

I kind of understood. Each day I worked to help those exiting incarceration get back on their feet. I helped them apply for public benefits, find housing, and reunite with their children. But the more I worked, the more I wished that the numbers of those incarcerated would decrease and the barriers they faced upon return to their community would disappear. I wished instead of addressing the symptoms of mass incarceration, I could change the system itself.

I wanted to band my community together to help my clients who were washed up get back into the world. I wished, most of all, that I could have provided them with a preventative net.

I am at OJPC because this organization has found a way to bring together social work, the law and policy to fight for criminal justice reform. They not only help one individual at a time, but they use their clients' stories to push for bigger change. While working at OJPC, no member of the staff has ever told me to think smaller.

[Learn more](#) about OJPC's summer internship program

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