

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/just-call-me-bala>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In 2010, Vera began working with the Ohio Green Prison Project (OGPP), a program to design and implement green vocational training and reentry programs that benefit incarcerated individuals and reduce the environmental impact and operating costs of prison systems. OGPP was inspired by the passion and energy of a young woman, Malar Balasubramanian. It is with great sadness that we share the news of Malar's passing last month, and seek to remember the incredible spirit and impact of her time with us.

While at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW), Malar watched women getting released and coming right back, with no job skills to support themselves. She noticed the prison buildings old and inefficient. She proposed that the institution train women to install solar panels and let them practice and gain work experience by installing the panels on the prison; this would reduce the environmental impact of the facility, and provide the women with marketable job skills. In addition, it would save the state money both through energy costs and reduced recidivism. Her passion for this concept, and support from family and friends, grew into Vera's Ohio Green Prison Project. It is now a model used increasingly in energy and conservation-related construction projects both within the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) and other correctional agencies across the country.

Malar also spent some time at the Franklin Pre-Release Center, where she set out to establish a recycling program for the institution. Staff remember how Malar wanted to do everything she could to make the program happen: That project was her baby. On top of all of this, Malar worked as a tutor and a dog handler but her positive impact went beyond these jobs. One woman who knew Malar at ORW reflected:

Malar left ODRC's care over four years ago, but staff who work with more than 3,000 women each year remembered her in a similar fashion: It is people like Malar who keep us committed to the mission.

I first met Malar in 2010 through my role as a planning analyst for OGPP. My interactions with her were always upbeat; she radiated a positive energy, friendly, excited, smiling. I knew that she struggled with depression, but our meetings were always focused on how we could turn her ideas into action, and I always left feeling energized and inspired. That is how she will be remembered: as someone who, despite a long and difficult struggle, never gave up trying to improve her community.

While Malar will be remembered for her generous and infectious spirit, she also serves as a reminder that mental health can be a lifelong struggle. Understanding issues concerning suicide and mental health is an important way to take part in suicide prevention, help others in crisis, and change the conversation around suicide. If you see warning signs, it is the right thing to do to ask the person if they are feeling down, hopeless, or have had thoughts to harm themselves. Open dialogue will only help that person to accept help and reach out to a qualified professional.

Leah Morgan works for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) as the energy conservation and sustainability administrator. Prior to this role, she worked for the Vera Institute of Justice as a planning analyst on the Ohio Green Prison Project, where she developed environmental sustainability programs, related educational opportunities, and strategic community partnerships with ODRC.

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