

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-t-r-u-e/working-together-toward-community-connection-and-comradeship-in-t-r-u-e>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Our vision for the T.R.U.E. program is to revolutionize how rehabilitation in corrections is accomplished in America. Through its success, the T.R.U.E. program will become the benchmark for youth rehabilitation first throughout Connecticut then beyond. The T.R.U.E. program embodies a therapeutic model that creates spaces for character development, teaches tools for success, provides positive methods of conflict resolution, mentors every stage of personal growth, and reduces recidivism, lowering the number of youth in adult facilities.

T.R.U.E. Unit Philosophy

An offender in the T.R.U.E. unit asked me, Why do you want to participate in this program?

I explained that I was tired of the revolving door in Corrections and the disruption it causes to the community.

They then asked, What experiences do you have dealing with this population?

Even though there has never been a unit like this in an adult correctional facility in the United States, I have had some experience working with 18- to 25-year-olds. Previously, I worked with youth who had intellectual and developmental disabilities in Waterbury, CT at the Waterbury Arc program and later mentored and assisted troubled youth who were members of a high school basketball team to achieve their dreams of playing basketball in college. While completing my bachelors degree in social work from Elms College in Chicopee, Massachusetts, I focused my energy on youthful offenders who were currently on probation, and I taught anger management classes at the Phoenix House, a drug addiction and recovery center.

I then began my career with the Department of Corrections at the Garner Institutions Behavior Management Unit, which housed a variety of offenders, including those 18 to 25 years of age who had diminished capacity. I then transitioned to Cheshire Correctional Institution (Cheshire CI), where I spent the majority of my time in the administrative segregation unit.

During the training to prepare to work on the new young adult unit, I realized the importance of establishing an easily identifiable symbol that reinforced a positive identity for the units members. This resulted in the creation of the units motto T.R.U.E: Truthful, Respectful, Understanding, and Elevating. The motto is a constant reminder of what the men living on the unit are trying to achieve and is best represented by our basketball team.

Cheshire CI started up an intermural basketball program, and I became the coach for the T.R.U.E programs team. Some of the biggest social forces in my life were my high school and college basketball coaches. As the only coach at Cheshire CI, my job was to create a team culture in which everyone works together and supports one another. I taught the team the fundamentals of the game and the importance of communication with each other. So far, we are 4-0 and have been winning by 20-point margins. The word has spread throughout the facility that the T.R.U.E unit is well organized and plays cohesively. The other teams have tried to replicate what we are doing, but fail to understand that what they witness on the court is a result of the community, connection, and comradeship that has been built within the unit.

I stress that if someone makes a bad play or choice, it is the teammates job to support them, to help them make a positive choice, and to lead them in the right direction. More and more correctional staff have been coming to watch our games. They are impressed with how organized the T.R.U.E program is and how receptive the team is to me as their coach. Discipline is something we represent. Respect is earned and not given. Community is what were creating. As some of the offenders say that this is the first time they have been part of a community.

We always hold the vision that the staff and offenders set out to achieve from the start. The men in the T.R.U.E unit came up with the philosophy of the unit. Heres the climate of the unit: every morning, as well as at the end of each day, they are asked to rate how they are feeling on a scale from one to 10. They also recite the philosophy of the unit at these times, so that no matter how they are feeling, they will know that they are working to be more truthful, respectful, understanding, and elevating as a community.

NEWS

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.