

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-t-r-u-e/connecticut-t-r-u-e-prison-program-offers-new-beginnings>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This post was co-written by Jordan and Tarence, two young men incarcerated in the T.R.U.E. unit at Cheshire Correctional Institution.

By Jordan:

When I first experienced the T.R.U.E program, it was similar to someone who goes through culture shock.

It was different from past experiences of jail I've been to. Especially the interactions with the COs; they were shaking my hand and asking genuine questions about myself, my goals, and how I felt about being in the program. They also said how important it was that I was selected to be here, which made me feel exclusive.

My first week was full of work such as picking a cell mate, organizing our cells, painting our cells, and putting a special paint on the door that allows us to write on it with chalk. Part of the painting process included painting special spaces on the walls where we could hang up our pictures and another place where we could put inspirational quotes or portraits. I also found myself attending programs that were created by the mentors and mentees. One of the first programs I attended was called Hip Hop Hermeneutics, which is where someone plays a song that has a special meaning to them, explains that meaning to the group, then the group expresses what they thought about that song. I found that unique in a sense that it gave me a different view on a song I already knew about.

The next few weeks just blurred together as I started getting into a routine. That included going to more programs and getting to know everyone. Now, in the mornings, I attend a group called current events where we read an up-to-date article and give our opinion on that article. Sometimes our opinions contradict and we get into debates, which is really interesting, because you see how passionate we are about our opinions. Then we have a group discussion in which we can bring up any issues or topics a person thinks will get the group to start thinking. Some topics that have been brought up are money, family support, unity, and much more. After that, we usually have lunch. On Wednesdays, we have a town hall meeting where all the counselors, the unit manager, the lieutenant, mentors, and mentees gather together to talk about issues going on in the block and how we can resolve these issues. Other programs we started to attend throughout the week include reflections, conflict resolution, good intentions, bad choices, and money management. Doing all these programs really helps me look within myself and see what I need to work on before I get released.

Some of the things I realize I had to work on included time management, public speaking, and procrastination. I am working on time management by getting up early to prioritize my day and envision my goals. Every morning and night, we get into these group circles where we tell each other how we feel based on a number: 1 being that you are feeling down and 10 meaning you are feeling your best. If you want to you can express your feeling on how your day went whether it was bad or good, which has helped me with my public speaking skills. I feel like this program is going to make me into a leader and give me the skills I need to become successful upon my release.

All of this is just the beginning and I've been told there is way more to come. I hope to write another blog and fill you in on my progress.

By Tarence:

When I first heard about this program I thought that this is my opportunity to prove to myself and to everybody that I don't belong in prison.

I know I made mistakes at a young age. One of those mistakes brought me to prison, but that does not define me as a person.

I heard about all the programs that were going to be available to us (mentees) in the T.R.U.E. unit, some of which would help us prepare for going back to society (freedom). I had to take advantage, because opportunities like this only come once. Also, I thought the program could help me on my people skills, so I could use my experience when I go home. With my experience from this program, I can accomplish a lot when I go home like job skills including maintaining a job.

One day I came back to my old unit from work and my counselor (who now works in the T.R.U.E. program) called me into her office; she handed me my acceptance paper. When I got the news, I was ecstatic. Out of 1,300 sentenced young adults in prison, I was one of the first ones to be accepted. I felt relief because I was constantly on my counselor about helping me get in.

First, I knew I would be a good asset to this program. I know right from wrong and Ive never been in trouble while incarcerated. Since being in prison, I have come to an even better understanding of right from wrong.

Second, there are some things I need to work on within myself so I can be a better person for myself and society. For example, I need to work on not allowing people who have bad days and attitudes to get me out of my calm state of mind. I also need to work on how I respond to nonsense comments that people throw my way. When someone throws a nonsense comment my way, I usually respond with an attitude or usually I will not talk to that person ever again. That is definitely something I need to work on within myself.

So far, the T.R.U.E unit has been an amazing experience, because it really feels like I have two jobs and way more responsibilities to consider. I have a job working in laundry, and then when I come back to the unit, I have either two or three programs to attend before my day is over. I love it for the simple fact that this unit is teaching us responsibility, and thats the main thing were going to have when we get home. We are not kids anymore and we have to take on the world as responsible, successful men.

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