

Title: How A Group of Incarcerated Vermonters Changed Prison from the Inside

No matter what your ideas about jail may be, what's happening in our Vermont prison will surprise you.

Vermont was one of five states chosen to participate in PRIN, the Prison Research and Innovation Network. With funding from the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., and support from researchers from the University of Vermont, Vermont's PRIN project was launched at the Southern State Correctional Facility in Springfield, Vermont, in 2020.

PRIN combined members of the prison population with prison staff. The two seemingly disparate groups found common ground working together to improve daily life at SSCF.

The opportunity to affect positive change was happily accepted by a core group of incarcerated individuals. As an incarcerated individual, having a voice and feeling like you can truly make an impact is a powerful force. Having a seat at the table restores a sense of agency and provides hope that things can get better and we can have a say in what and how.

Progress was, at first, slow. Change is often resisted on a nearly instinctive level, whether it be personal change or institutional. The Department of Corrections, as one might imagine, was no different. But we pushed on, narrowed our scope, refined our ideas, and, with patience, we brought the first change to our prison: plastic barriers that had been erected in the Visiting Room during COVID were removed, greatly improving hearing during visits with loved ones. "I couldn't hear my 80-year old mother talk, and she couldn't hear me with that...barrier up. She'd drive an hour and a half each way and we couldn't carry out a conversation. It's so much better now; like night and day," said one smiling man. Beside him another agreed, "We have so little contact with the outside world that the time we do get becomes that much more important. Being unable to actually hear or understand your loved one was frustrating and heartbreaking. One, lone, bright spot had become dimmer. Removing the barriers created more connections to the outside."

More innovations followed. Notably, an Honors Unit was established. Honors Unit residents, who must complete a competitive application to live in the unit, have more agency than other incarcerated individuals and regularly volunteer to help their fellow incarcerated individuals in need. Incarcerated individuals from the Honors Unit opened and operate a coffee shop. Perry, one of the incarcerated individuals who helped open the shop and now manages its day-to-day operations, notes, "One main focus for opening the coffee shop was for it to serve as an incentive for incarcerated individuals to pay attention to their behavior. It's working, disciplinary reports are down overall since the coffee shop opened." Michael, another resident, described the transporting power of the shop: "The coffee shop has become a safe space for

me. It's a place I can go that allows me to forget I'm in jail for a few minutes. I really can't overstate the value in that."

Data from incarcerated individuals and UVM research surveys provided road maps for more innovations. Progressive thinking created an environment from which astounding opportunities continue to grow: Community College of Vermont is offering courses for college credit (a huge thank you to Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for his pivotal role) and several incarcerated individuals have enrolled with the National Prison Debate League, an international organization that works to empower inmates through debate. "I never thought I'd be taking part in a debate against students from Wake Forest while incarcerated," says one member of the debate team. "I haven't accomplished much in my life, so being a part of this means a lot."

There are proposals now under consideration studying the brightness of cells at night to determine a better (darker) light level. "It's so hard to sleep in a room that's bright enough to read in," is a common sentiment. Discussions on improving access to medical care are underway, such as retooling the process for receiving medications each day, requesting medical attention when ill, and sharing medical test results with incarcerated individuals.

Yes, institutional inertia can be difficult to overcome. We see this happening all around the country in many ways. But our process here at SSCF has proven real change is possible. We want to keep the momentum going and continue down the road less traveled, the road of change and innovation. Our sincere hope is that other institutions in our state, and throughout the country, take note of our progress, of our many successes, and take the first steps towards their own paths of innovation and improvement.

Christian, Edward, Josh, Michael,	Perry, & Richard; SSCF incarcerated individuals Springfield, VT
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