

Texas Catholic Action Plan for Criminal Justice

Why is this needed?

To meet the pastoral needs of over 1.1 million men, women, and juveniles under some form of correctional supervision in Texas, a plan is needed to stimulate action at the state, archdiocese/diocese, and parish levels to reduce trauma within the law enforcement and criminal justice systems, prevent crime as well as reduce it, improve the lives of both offenders and their caretakers and move toward better public safety. This is the largest defined population group in Texas with critical needs and the most underserved. This plan also addresses victims of crime that also need reconciliation and healing.

Currently, offenders are put in prison, eventually released, often re-offend and return to prison. Most are non-violent and need treatment, but do not get it. This system is wasteful and destructive in both financial and human terms. The culture of the criminal justice system must change from punitive to rehabilitative, recognizing that public safety is not served until a majority of offenders stabilize their life styles and become free of alcohol or drugs. To do this they must develop a social conscience. A well trained correctional staff, a full spiritual program, and alcohol and drug abuse treatment are essential to this happening.

To impact this population, those negative characteristics they reflect must be addressed. There are five major characteristics that 85% of prison inmates have:

- School dropouts
- Abused and/or neglected as children
- Reared in fatherless households
- Addicted to or abuse drugs and/or alcohol
- No spiritual life lived

They do not have one or two of these characteristics, they have them all. Additionally, an estimated 25% to 30% of prison inmates suffer from some form of mental illness.

The current criminal justice system tends to over incarcerate non-violent offenders who need treatment to stabilize. Treatment is better accomplished in the communities where the offender resides. The reductions in chaplains and treatment programs has ignored major elements for the inmate to attain a social conscience.

The largest and most concentrated group of offenders is in state and federal prisons; however, the most difficult to deal with may be the local population, who rotate in and out of the county jails, wrought with substance abuse and mental illness. This population will likely never go to state prison but will continue to drain city and county resources. For example, Travis County arrests about 55,000 persons annually, most of who fit into this category, and are repeat offenders. When the jail population was 1,500 inmates, there were only 22 first time offenders, as the population grew to 2,160 inmates, the first timers only increased to 50. To stabilize, these repeat offenders need to have a change of heart. Obviously, the punishment being administered does not do this. We can and must show them that the way to change occurs only through a spiritual awakening. We learn to work with prison inmates through the experience of alcohol anonymous. The action plan is built with this focus in mind.

The Bishops of Texas endorse the following actions that are considered critical to better serve the area of criminal justice:

Action Steps

Diocese/ Arch Diocese

Priority One – Short Range Activities

- Assign a deacon, priest, or qualified lay person as coordinator of diocesan criminal justice ministry with a budget.
- Develop an inventory of incarceration facilities in the diocese, including the state (TDCJ) jails and prisons, federal (BOP) prisons, and juvenile (TYC and TJPC) facilities, county jails and court residential treatment centers (CRTC).
- Identify and develop a database of current active volunteers, and determine ongoing Catholic activities in each facility.
- Determine additional Catholic presence required to provide the sacraments to the inmates as a first priority.
- Recruit volunteers (priests, deacons, religious or lay) to provide catechism, bible studies, sacramental preparation, mentoring, and/or other programs which might be offered to help inmates grow in their faith development. Programs will be provided based upon the volunteers' available and their capabilities and interests.
- Hold information and training sessions on a diocesan/deanery/ vicariate level based using the curriculum of the Texas Catholic Correctional Ministry (PowerPoint presentation and video presentation, "Who is in prison, How they got there, and What we can do about it?", provided).
- Minimum requirements for volunteers for state prisons is the 3-4 hour orientation by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. County jails usually have their own orientation as do TYC and juvenile probation facilities.

Priority Two – Mid Range Activities

- Work with individual parishes to develop parish teams to work with offenders in prison, those on probation or parole, and ex-offenders upon release to the community. In small communities, it may be helpful to develop working relationships with other faith groups or organizations.
- Establish a Criminal Justice Ministry Sunday to increase diocesan awareness as to the criminal justice needs so that the faithful will better understand the issues and see their call to participate.
- Assist the development of local level efforts to reduce recidivism in the local county jails through focusing on substance abuse treatment and mental health screening and treatment.

Priority Three – Long Range Activities

- Develop a diocesan policy for hiring formerly incarcerated persons.
- Encourage local district/county attorneys to:
 - Establish diversion programs for juvenile non-violent offenders requiring accountability but keeping them out of the criminal justice system.
 - Increase the use of probation for non-violent offenders who need treatment to stabilize.
- Encourage the funding of Catholic halfway house beds for parolees in established facilities as alternatives to establishing a church supported halfway house. Also, provide spiritual support for these units.
- Set-up a Project RACHEL-Post-Abortion Program that reaches out to the offenders population while incarcerated.

Parish Level

Priority One – Short Range Projects

- Assign a capable volunteer, clergy or lay, to coordinate criminal justice activities in the parish.
- Implement activities proposed by diocese for Criminal Justice Ministry Sunday to increase awareness and promote parish involvement through volunteer recruitment.
- Establish parish teams to visit prisons and detention facilities of both adults and juveniles to provide spiritual support through prayer and the sacraments to the incarcerated using this process or something similar:
 - Visit the facility to be supported to determine any Catholic presence.
 - Seek support of the chaplain, jailer, sheriff, or warden to provide Catholic activities within the facility.
 - Gather interested persons in parish together and brief them on nature of offenders: who they are, their lifestyle that led to incarceration, and what might be the means to address their problem. (video provided)
 - Form support teams to accompany the priest or deacon into the facility to provide the sacraments.
 - Support spiritual needs of inmates at each facility to the extent of the volunteer's abilities.
 - Encourage volunteers to participate in religious formation classes in the diocese and the parish to increase their own abilities.

Priority Two – Medium Range Projects

- In conjunction with Parish Social Ministries, St. Vincent de Paul Society Conferences, and Knights of Columbus through their charity work, provide material support to families of the incarcerated in need. Develop a relationship with local school counselors to help identify families in need who will accept support from the church.
- Develop a support group(s) for formerly incarcerated person in the community encouraging sobriety, employment and completion of high school or GED where needed. Encourage faith groups to participate.
- Work with victims groups at the police and/or sheriffs departments to determine any assistance you are able to provide to include moral support.

Priority Three – Longer Range Activities

- In conjunction with the sheriffs department and local mental health/ mental retardation facilities, focus on reducing the repeat jail population which fills most county jails involving low level offenses through diversion in to treatment programs, support groups, and monitoring programs. Develop community support for this.
- Encourage business owners in the parish to hire ex-offenders who want to stabilize. Let them view the video “Who Is In Prison...”
- Encourage the local judiciary and district and county attorneys to develop alternative sentencing for persons who really need treatment as opposed to incarceration. Particularly advocate for probation with treatment.
- Adopt a law enforcement unit (police station, sheriff's office, probation office, parole office, county jail, state or federal prison) and provide support to those who operate the criminal justice system.

Addendum – The following needs have been recognized as critical to offenders released back into community. If they have no family, they need food, clothing, ID cards, bus tickets/ transportation, jobs, medical attention often, shelter or funds for shelter until they get an income, drug and/or abuse treatment, AA Na meetings, mental health needs and follow-up GED or other education/ vocational training.

These needs should be developed in the community: AA/NA meetings, food pantries, and medical assistance for offenders and their families, from Catholic or other hospitals, and from Catholic and other physicians.

State Level

The Texas Catholic Conference (TCC) is the responsible element for pursuing those tasks which must be undertaken involving the interests of several arch/diocese. The Texas Catholic Correctional Ministers are available to assist in this work.

TCC is tasked to do the following:

- Hold an annual conference on criminal justice issues for clergy and lay involved in any phase of criminal justice work. (Oct. 20-21, 2006 - 1st Annual Statewide Conference)
- Develop a briefing document outlining who is in prison, how they got there, and what we can do about stabilizing the population group and preventing youth from entering the criminal justice system. (Completed and available on video)
- Encourage the legislature to study prevention programs and focus on reducing the number of youth entering the criminal justice system. (Underway with House Corrections Committee)
- Promote after school programs to provide activities for children and youth during the hours between 3:00pm and 6:00pm, when the juvenile crime rate peaks. These programs have been shown to reduce crime rate by 1/2 to 2/3.
- Support the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program which provides trained volunteers to work with abused and neglected children who have been taken from their parents, and assist in the court hearings to shepherd them into a stable family situation free from abuse and neglect.
- Maintain an active liaison with legislative committees dealing with criminal justice and provide information on criminal justice matters to ensure understanding of the issues and promote abolition of the death penalty. (underway House and Senate)
- Establish liaison with the Office of the Governor so that he understands the criminal justice issues which the church supports.
- Encourage the Knights of Columbus to develop support from local councils to the jails and prisons in their areas. Increase their service role. (underway with new state deputy)
- Encourage St. Vincent de Paul chapters to become involved in working with offenders and their families.
- Establish liaison with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Board so as to keep them aware of concerns of the church in areas of criminal justice.
- Explore the possibility of opening up Project RIO, Re-Integration of Offenders, to probationers to assist in job search.
- Work with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to make improvements in the operation of the system and handling of incarcerated persons, parolees and probationers. Many suggestions have been communicated and discussed with the directors of correctional institutes, the director of the parole division, and the House Corrections Committee. These are presented below under three the topical headings:

Prison Systems

- Change the culture in the prison system from punitive to rehabilitative, recognizing that public safety is not served unless the majority of offenders stabilize their lifestyle and become free of alcohol and drugs. To reach this goal, the corrections system must help the offenders develop a social conscience. A well trained correctional staff, full spiritual program, alcohol/ drug abuse treatment and cognitive programs are essential to make this happen.
- Improve the lives and abilities of the correctional staff through training in substance abuse, anger resolution, leadership, discipline and people skills.
- Establish training academies for middle management, lieutenant to major, and for wardens in advanced prison management, similar to what has been done for sergeants.
- Define the rehabilitation mission of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, post it conspicuously throughout all prisons, and see that it is promulgated throughout the ranks, correctional staff, and incarcerated population and ensure that it reflects significance of family visits and support.
- Provide sufficient chaplains to both meet the spiritual needs of the inmate population and staff, bring in volunteers to assist in that task; provide staff support to the chaplains-inmates who can type and do office work.
- Establish sufficient number of AA/NA programs through volunteer teams to meet the needs of the entire incarcerated population.
- Enhance mental health sections on each unit to deal with mental health/ mental retardation cases focusing on assisting in stabilizing the individuals and reducing abuse among the population.
- Record recidivism data for each unit and include this as an item on evaluation reports.
- Establish internal disciplinary means other than adding to sentences for offenses committed by inmates. The Navy used bread and water for a week in the brig to shape sailors up.
- Establish secure, affordable, phone services to assist inmates in staying in touch with their families.
- Establish a pay scale for correctional officers commensurate with their responsibilities.
- Encourage free exercise of religious activities so as to oppose denominational bias.

Parole System

- Develop teams to examine persons ready for parole made up of chaplains, counselors, educators, correctional officers, and inmates in and effort to reduce the recidivism rate, which is 6 out of 10 released inmates.
- Train parole officers in substance abuse and addiction, people skills, leadership and an understanding of who is in prison and how they got there.
- Work with parolees to change their life style and do not re-incarcerate them unless they are a serious threat to society or commit another felony.
- Effect a change in parole officer's attitudes to reflect rehabilitation as opposed to enforcement.
- Provide treatment where necessary for as many cases that really need it to remain clean and sober.

- Set up an absconder section, which deals with absconder cases to determine whether they can be salvaged or must return to prison.
- Expand training in anger management and life skills to cover the need for parolees.
- AA has recognized that a spiritual element is involved in gaining sobriety. Encourage parolees to seek a church of their choice. We find that people who go to church every week generally don't go to jail.
- Ensure that pedophiles and other addicted sex offenders get into a treatment modality permanently.
- Solicit support from local parishes to provide support groups, material and financial support for needy parolees.
- Encourage parole division to establish a greater variety of sanctions other than returning persons to prison.

Probation System

- Establish a maximum 5 year probation sentence which has an automatic review by the court at 2 years. This would bring Texas law in line with most other jurisdictions. (It can be determined within 2 years whether or not a person is going to gain control of his/ her life. Currently, the monthly probation fees are paying for one third of the cost of the probation system. The current 10 year probation sentence is used to milk more money for the system. This practice is abusive to people who are struggling to succeed.)
- Increase the effort of Community Corrections to provide effective treatment programs.
- Lower the case loads of probation office to no more than 60 clients. (Currently, many have case loads of 150-180. This kind of load precludes effective supervision.)