

Chaplaincy behind Bars

Liz Milner

Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy of Santa Clara County, Inc. (CIC), is a nonprofit organization that holds a contract with Santa Clara County, California, to provide all chaplaincy services to the approximately 3,500 inmates in the county jail and the approximately 130 youth in juvenile facilities. The only group we do not serve are Catholic inmates, who have their own chaplain services through a separate contract. Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy seeks to be a loving, encouraging presence for all incarcerated men, women, and youth in county jails, regardless of their faith background, denomination, or affiliation. We are people who aim to listen well while providing support for all in a time of great stress and crisis. As we listen well to the stories and pain of our brothers and sisters, we aim to foster respect, which leads to trust and ultimately to hope. We respond to requests for counsel, religious services, religious diets, grief counseling, and more. We perform death notices for inmates in custody and aim to provide at least one religious service in each unit each week. We provide Muslim, Buddhist, and other services as well as pastoral counseling, and we respond to requests for religious and other reading materials. We currently receive a grant to purchase eyeglasses that we distribute to our elderly inmates.

Liz Milner is executive director of Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy of Santa Clara County, Inc. More information about the ministry can be found at www.cicministries.org or by emailing Liz Milner. Email: liz@cicministries.org.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

* © Copyright 2020 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*
All Rights Reserved

Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy employs four full-time chaplains, one full-time administrator, and two half-time chaplains, one of whom is an imam who coordinates our Muslim services. We supervise about 250 volunteers from a wide variety of Christian denominations and other faith traditions who conduct many of our weekly services, some of whom are trained to visit inmates one-on-one. Approximately half our funding comes from a county grant and the other half from donations. I and our board of directors oversee our financial dealings.

Each of our staff chaplains is required to hold an MDiv or equivalent master's degree, to have completed at least one unit of clinical pastoral education, and to be ordained by a recognized denomination or faith group. The chaplains are accountable both to their denomination and to the institution of the jail and are expected to bridge those groups and institutions with integrity and professional skills. Our volunteers are required to provide a personal reference from a recognized, local faith leader, to have been in their spiritual community at least one year, to interview with a chaplain before receiving clearance, to complete an extensive security and background check through the jail, and to commit to ongoing training and supervision with the chaplaincy staff. We have had to discipline and remove volunteers for breaching our policies of engagement, which include:

- Do not proselytize.
- Do not engage in conversations around sensitive or volatile spiritual topics, including gender and sexuality, abortion, hell, and judgment.
- Maintain respectful communication with all jail employees and inmates and follow directions of the custodial staff at all times.
- Maintain effective physical and conversational boundaries in all dealings with inmates.

Our ministry seeks to serve and empower inmates, who are often in crisis and significantly disempowered in many areas of their lives. We work hard to build our own increasing self-awareness of our power and privilege as people who work in the jail system, with the goal of better caring for and building up the inmates we work with. This ministry is a calling to be with people at a time of great brokenness and suffering and as such should be discerned carefully. We encourage those who have been victims of a crime, who are dealing with mental health challenges, who are dealing with loss and grief, who have family in the criminal justice system, or who have themselves been accused of a crime to process extensively with

us when they are considering serving as a volunteer. We have found these issues can be triggered in the jail.

I started as a volunteer chaplain in this ministry and joined the staff team as a full-time facility chaplain, spending the majority of my time with inmates and supervising and developing volunteers. Now, as executive director, about half my time is spent with inmates and volunteers and about half is spent running the organization (administration, staff management, fundraising, etc.). It is exciting to be able to use my administrative gifts to help the organization run smoothly and efficiently so that we can more effectively serve the inmates, but administration is not why I became a chaplain. In some ways, the precise and concrete nature of the executive part of my role is a comforting counterbalance to the ambiguous and unfinishable nature of the chaplaincy side of my work. However, I often feel inadequate to deal with the vagaries of the nonprofit insurance required by the county, staff conflicts, fundraising, and so on. There is often a disconnect between the culture of running an organization efficiently and being the kind of chaplain who can sit with someone in great brokenness without trying to fix them. As director, I have to bridge that gap, and it's not easy, nor is it something that most seminaries or CPE courses prepare you for.

Another challenge and opportunity for us at CIC is to supervise and develop our large volunteer base effectively. It is impossible for our team of five chaplains to personally connect with over 250 volunteers regularly. We try to connect with our volunteer base in multiple ways, including holding three or four large trainings per year; we ask each volunteer to attend at least one. For those volunteers working in more intense or intimate ways with inmates, we offer voluntary monthly "lunch in jail" trainings to look at issues such as boundaries in communication with inmates or volunteer self-awareness. Each jail facility has its own culture, and so about once a year we hold facility-specific meetings. Every two years our volunteers have to renew their clearance, and we use this opportunity to take time to engage them in self-reflection, helping them to review and sense where they are being called in this season of life. However, even with all these structures in place, I yearn for more effective ways to connect with and learn with this amazing group of people. We could not reach the inmates in the jail each week the way we do without them, and so the quality of our ministry is dependent on their engagement and reflection.