Notes from Checo Yancy, LA CURE Pres.

Well everyone, we just came off on of several great victories, take a moment to take a deep breath, now exhale, it shows us all what dedication from this community can bring about change. What did we all learn from this very these important moments? One that, these opportunities are available and two that we as a team we can celebrate many more, by getting out the vote. 2019 will bring about many challenges, are you prepared to get back to work?

The Big Question for March 1, 2019, can you VOTE? Learn the New Law from our Friends at VOTE @ vote-nola.org

Thanks to the effort, dedication and leadership of Formerly Incarcerated People (FIP). Their loved ones and their allies, a new law will restore voting rights to people on probation and parole beginning March 1, 2019. Find out if YOU are eligible:

On March 1, 2019, you CAN register to vote IF:

You are off probation/parole by then, or

You have been on parole or probation for 5 years by then, or

You have not been incarcerated on a probation violation by then

Let’s go by the numbers

LOUISIANA HAS

3.5 Million Registered Voters

1.7 Million People with Criminal Records

16,000 People released from prison each year

35,000 on probation can now Vote

3,000 People on Parole can now Vote

15,000 People released from jail each year

71,000 people will be able to Vote, If we Win VOTE v LA

If you are not sure of your Rights? Need to Register to VOTE? Please contact our allies at 504-571-9599 or email them at vote.nola.org just a Quick Note for LA CURE

Other suggested items on the Agenda for 2019:

Habitual offender statute reform

Parole eligibility for lifers and virtual lifers

Prosecutorial misconduct

Remember, the LPA Lobby day is now May 6 at the Capitol Welcome Center in Baton Rouge

Remember, the ongoing eTe Campaign (Equitable Telephone Charges) is working to improve and cut the high cost of the prison telephone systems. You can help by letting your Public Service Commissioner or local legislator know how unfair it is for you to have pay such high costs to talk with your loved one.

CURE is a membership organization of families of prisoners, prisoners, former prisoners and other concerned citizens. CURE’s two goals are to use prisons only for those who need to be in them and for those who need to be in them, to provide them all the rehabilitative opportunities they need to turn their lives around.
Special Thanks! – Kelly Garrett, LA CURE Vice Pres.

As we near the end of 2018, I reflect on all the accomplishments that have been made in our efforts to reform our criminal justice system. Many have joined the efforts in ways suitable to their means from casting a “YES” vote to encouraging loved ones to being out in the streets volunteering time and resources. It has all been and will continue to be an effort where being involved matters.

Juvenile lifers are beginning to see the results of efforts put in. It is amazing, yet humbling, to witness those now being considered for relief and released from decades of incarceration. The journey continues as many begin a brand new chapter in their lives. I encourage all those who are seeking and granted relief to join us as we continue to push forward in reform.

The most recent effort has been the passing of unanimous jury verdicts. Louisiana is now aligned with the rest of the country, minus Oregon, in requiring unanimous juries to convict a person of a felony crime. This is huge, as we have been an outlier for over a century. Many have seen the injustice of this heinous law and now we’ve set the tone for felony jury trials moving forward beginning January 1, 2019.

So, THANK YOU!! Thank you for voting. Thank you for speaking up for reform. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for just sharing. But we cannot stop. Let’s continue the conversations. Let’s continue to encourage others to register to vote and elect those who are vested in the interest of reform. Let’s continue to uplift each other. And, let’s continue to just show up!! Much love...

The 70Times7 Initiative – Stephaine Gaskill, LA CURE Member

In January 2018, the Louisiana Interchurch Conference established the 70 Times7 Initiative to address the exclusion of people convicted of violent crimes and sex offenses from our state’s recent wave of criminal justice reform. Over the past year, we have gathered church and community members to hear formerly incarcerated people share their expertise and personal experiences.

A former district attorney, the state public defender, and an advocate for victims of sexual assault have joined us to correct common misconceptions. And we have discussed the Christian principles that should guide our approach to violent crimes and sex offenses. These encounters are helping shift the false perceptions that too often lead us to hastily label individuals as “the worst of the worst.” In the coming year, we hope to build on these successes, bringing 70Times7 to more congregations and encouraging churches to actively support fairer and just policies.

Poem for 2019

Compassion
There is a place in our hearts that are designed to feel,
It is an unseen place, and for some it is an uncharted place.

Fear!
It keeps us bound and shackled to the hurt that destroys the very being of who we are,
We become in bondage to it, while it becomes free in us.
Where there is no compassion, there is no freedom.
Where there is no freedom, there can be no happiness.
Holding on is sometimes a lot harder than just letting go,
But it is the letting go that gives us the ability to really hold on.

Compassion takes courage!
The courage to forgive. The courage to feel sorrow for another human being.
And most importantly, the courage to love past the hurt that we have all experienced.
Because where there is no compassion, there is no freedom.
Where there is no freedom, there is no true happiness.

- Justin C. Singleton
Present and Future Criminal Justice Reform – Father Dan Krutz, LIC

As we reflect on the work of criminal justice reform efforts and implementation in 2018 it is with a heart filled with gratitude that causes me at once to give thanks for all the caring people and their leaders who carried through with amazing advocacy efforts and successes! There is enough success to go around so that everyone can claim victory for this endeavor because, in truth, success came because of the efforts of thousands and, perhaps, millions of people in Louisiana. Certainly, the Unanimous Jury verdict will be recognized as a paradigm shift in the justice system of our State. On a personal note it was a very special moment of real joy for me was to sit next to Checo Yancy when the Louisiana Senate approved a bill that led to the passage of an Act to allow formerly incarcerated persons to recover their right to vote!

We have so much to be thankful for and the successes of the past two years inspire me and hopefully you as well in preparing for the possibilities of 2019 and beyond. We’ve all had those times in our lives when we have several visions or dreams about what could be. That’s my feeling in looking to the possibilities of justice reform. One dream to be fulfilled is the time when even those incarcerated are eligible to vote. More challenging for me is to see clearly the way to fulfill a vision of a newly found empathy for those rehabilitated after having committed “violent” crimes and/or “sex offenses.” The Church could have a very prominent role in creating a society where forgiveness and acceptance can reach new heights.

A rare but truly bright spot in Federal legislation that came at the close of 2018 was the criminal justice reform package, Formerly Incarcerated Reenter Society Transformed Safely Transitioning Every Person Act (FIRST STEP Act). Some have described this reform to the Federal Prison system the most significant reform in a generation. The legislation reduces sentences of those unfairly targeted with harsh sentences of the past and offers significant programs focused on rehabilitation and transformation of those in the system. Often Federal legislation has an immediate impact on States so that, hopefully, in Louisiana’s case, we can expect further reforms in the years ahead. It is important to keep in mind that, though the criminal justice reforms passed in Louisiana’s legislature were bipartisan, the leadership of Governor John Bel Edwards was an essential key to its success.

An area of focus for me continues to be how to recruit churches and church people for advocacy in this public policy area, but just as important, to educate and help change the mindset of people of Faith in welcoming those who are being released from our prisons. The Churches could take on a more significant role in reducing recidivism of those freed from prisons. Attitudes need to be changed, and one significant way to make that happen is through learning more about the struggles of those incarcerated and how they got there. There are many hopeful signs to keep the momentum going, and Louisiana can continue to provide part of the solution to the many problems that have plagued the criminal justice system in America.

Where is Hope? – Kerry Myers, LA CURE Member

This may be the most elusive question for anyone who is incarcerated and especially for those serving long-term or life sentences. Hope is both an external and internal concept. It is something tangible, something you can see or experience that provides the fuel for each day. It is also a feeling, a belief, a self-awareness that circumstances, attitudes and policies and can and do change.

If the past year has not been evidence for hope, then I do not know what is. Battles were fought in the Legislature to hold the line on hard-earned reforms. For the most part they were successful. But two pieces of legislation that had for years had seen battles waged, two pieces that unexpectedly broke through, will give hope for future change. The unanimous jury amendment passed in November by a 63 percent-plus margin. Starting next year, to be convicted of a felony, it will take all twelve jurors to agree. The effect will be to improve all working parts of the system. Prosecutors will charge more accurately and bring better cases, no longer able to roll the dice on weak prosecutions because they do not need a unanimous verdict. Juries will do their jobs better because all will be required to reach the same verdict. A practice born in racism has been soundly dispatched by the voters signaling an ongoing desire for change.

The other piece of legislation that fosters hope is the restoration of voting rights to persons on parole or probation. More than 70,000 people are directly affected by this law and more than 10,000 will be able to vote after March 1, 2019. Finally, the voices of formerly incarcerated people who are contributing to their communities and their families will be heard. This was a hard fought, difficult battle and people whose voting rights are being restored should not take this for granted. Encourage anyone you know who is affected by this law to exercise their right and continue the progress that is being made.

For those who are incarcerated, especially lifers, look around you and take notice of those who were there last year but are now free. This is what hope looks like. Those who were prepared, did the work, are now reaping the benefit of their efforts through freedom. More than 40 juvenile and Act 280 lifers have now been released on parole. They are learning how to lead new lives, productive lives, and are very aware that they carry a responsibility for those who are still incarcerated. Their successes, their accomplishments, are plowing new ground for future change. This is what hope looks like.

A new book released December 4, “The Meaning of Life,” by The Sentencing Project’s Marc Mauer and Ashley Nellis, and former Angolite editor Kerry Myers, has been receiving critical acclaim for its forward thinking and humane look at life sentences in the United States. Coinciding with a national campaign to end life sentences, the book presents the most comprehensive data the use of life sentences and compelling arguments for how public safety would actually improve with its abolishment except in the rarest of cases. “The Meaning of Life” has been getting plenty of attention from policy makers and reformers. This is also what hope looks like.

Finding hope and holding on to it can be difficult and elusive. But look around. Change is not only coming, it has come. Maybe not today for everyone but remember the yesterdays when those for whom it has come also looked out on a barren field, lacking external confirmation, but who held on to an intangible feeling until their hope met reality.

Merry Christmas
CURE – Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants

Let’s Keep the Ball Rolling

CURE is a 501(c) 3 Organization

If your address is changed, you must let us know; all returned newsletters will not be re-mailed, postage is too high, we will delete you from our mailing list.