

June 16, 2014

Dear Texas Sunset Commission:

I am writing this document as a concerned volunteer mentor who has been working with emancipated foster care youth at Angel Reach and soon to be released prisoners in Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) system. My experiences have led me to conclude that if the Department of Family & Protective Services (DFPS) embraced volunteer mentor programs in the same manner as TDCJ, our foster youth would be better prepared to launch into productive lives. With a strong volunteer mentoring program, I believe that each foster care child in Texas would receive greater individual love and attention, development programs could be better tailored to their individual needs and they would better learn those life skills necessary to become productive adults. I also believe that instances of child abuse and neglect in the foster care system would be drastically reduced and even eliminated. After reading the May 2014 Sunset Staff Report, I have great concern that utilizing the broad volunteer base available in the state of Texas has been overlooked and underdeveloped.

TDCJ has been using faith-based volunteers for many years in an increasing number of units across Texas. In recent years, Kairos and other faith-based activities have increased in many prisons with significant results. Prison violence has dropped, the guards and prisoners are treating each other more respectfully, and recidivism rates have dropped significantly for inmates involved with these faith-based volunteer programs. With prison staff and volunteers working together, inmates receive training in job skills, anger management, and other life skills needed to be good citizens. These are real results that I have experienced as a trained TDCJ volunteer at the Hightower Prison in Dayton, Texas. As one longtime inmate told me, "There is less blood on the floor since you guys came to this unit."

As certified TDJC mentors, we help the inmates develop a life's plan, think through the challenges they will face upon release, and openly discuss how they will respond to those challenges. We also help them prepare a resume, a check-list of what they need to do to prepare for departure, help them identify and apply for safe housing and help them with their communications with the free world. This work starts years before they are released, beginning with faith based programs and intensifying to one-on-one mentoring about 12 to 18 month before they are actually released. After release, the mentors maintain contact with their respective ex-offenders to continue to help them talk through life's struggles, find jobs and transportation and offer that friendship to help them get through that difficult first year after release. In many cases the friendships last for a lifetime. One of my mentees was in and out of Texas foster care system several times. His testimony to me is that if someone had mentored him in his youth as he has been mentored in prison that his crime could have been prevented and he could have led a productive life from his youth rather than having to serve a seventeen-year sentence.

In volunteering as a mentor with our emancipated foster care youth, none of the youth that I have met have been mentored in the manner utilized by TDJC. Most of us are well

aware of the negative statistics for emancipated foster youth (see attachment A, Youth in Transition). In the past several years, I have seen over one hundred emancipated foster youth trying to make the transition from foster care into productive citizens. They leave the foster care system with almost no life skills or planning capabilities. Most are or were homeless. Most have been medicated with psychotropic drugs, some since they were babies. Few have graduated from high school. Nearly seventy percent of the young women are pregnant or have one or more children. Over thirty percent of the young men already have criminal records. Most have never held a job and none even have a driver's license. They don't know how to shop for groceries, balance a checkbook, or interview for a job. All have been traumatized. The negative trajectory of these young people's lives is tragic.

I believe strongly that if DFPS would adopt volunteer mentoring programs similar to the TDCJ model, that we could dramatically change the negative trajectory for our foster care youth exiting foster care. In my experience, the faith-based volunteers who have a heart for helping the incarcerated offer hope and direction to these prisoners. Volunteers could do the same for our foster children.

In my volunteer work, I have come in contact with many volunteers who would like to work closer with the children and families in Texas' foster care, but they don't see an open avenue within the DFPS system to get engaged. In fact, there are barriers to volunteer involvement. For example, I attended the April 15 hearing in Austin of the House Human Services Committee on the foster care redesign. During that meeting we heard the director of CASA Texas testify that CASA would be willing to get more involved working with and mentoring the children in foster care. A representative from an association of foster parents spoke of their issues recruiting and retaining good foster families. She spoke of how many of the families feel disrespected and undervalued by the foster care system and how she would like to be engaged in finding answers to problems recruiting and retaining good foster families. Bishop Aaron Blake from the faith-based non-profit Global Orphan Project, spoke of how his organization works with churches to help them develop programs to care for the orphans and foster care children. These groups are examples of non-profits who are willing and ready to help communities take more of the responsibility of the care of our foster children. During the April 15 testimony, one message became loud and clear...volunteers are willing to help but they need and want to be invited into a partnership with the DFPS and are willing to take a seat at the table of the redesign effort and the care of foster children.

The beauty of this proposal is that it will cost the state of Texas little to nothing to embrace this army of volunteers. The Corporation for National Community Service website (see Attachment B) offers amazing statistics to the number of volunteers available within the state of Texas. In 2012 overall, 24.0% of all Texas residents volunteered with an average of 28.7 volunteer hours per resident per year. Those statistics equal to 4.49 million Texas volunteers, with 556.1 million hours of service and \$12.3 billion of service contributed. In addition, these statistics indicate that 40% of these volunteers are focused on tutoring or teaching children.

If DFPS could tap into a mere one half of one percent (0.5%) of these Texas volunteers, the number would exceed 22,000 volunteers with their combined services equaling over \$61 million. That is a significant amount of support for any organization. Plus, as the baby boomers continue to retire at a rate of 6,000 per day nationally, I believe that the number of available volunteers will continue to grow. A significant number of those retirees will be looking for something meaningful to engage in, and what could be more meaningful than saving the life of a child and preparing him or her to become a productive adult?

To put this number of volunteers in perspective, Hightower prison alone, there are over 200 volunteers from many walks of life. These volunteers pay their own costs and bring their wealth of experience with them, working together with the warden, Chaplin, guards, and staff to rehabilitate the incarcerated and accomplish the mission of TDCJ.

It appears to me that the timing is right to make a significant shift in how the Texas foster care system works by utilizing the many volunteers who are ready, willing, and able to partner with DFPS to help improve the foster care system for our children, the foster families, and the employees of Texas' foster care system. I also believe that the partnership between the TDCJ prison leadership, volunteers, and prison staff can be used as a model of how state organizations, nonprofits, and volunteers can work together to improve life for the children in foster care while maximizing value from the existing budgets. It will take support from the Texas House and Senate and strong leadership from the DFPS to make this shift, but I have seen it done in our prisons... it is certainly possible to translate this to the foster care system.

For more information about the volunteer programs at TDCJ, please contact Stacy Woods, Director of Volunteer Services, Rehabilitation Program Division. Her contact information is: email: stacy.woods@tdcj.state.tx.us , phone numbers: office 936-437-3027 and cell . I would also be happy to put you in contact with some of the lead volunteers working at Hightower, if that would be helpful.

Please contact me if you are interested in more details on how to increase volunteer involvement with our children in foster care.

Respectfully submitted,



David G. Staat
TDCJ and Angel Reach Volunteer