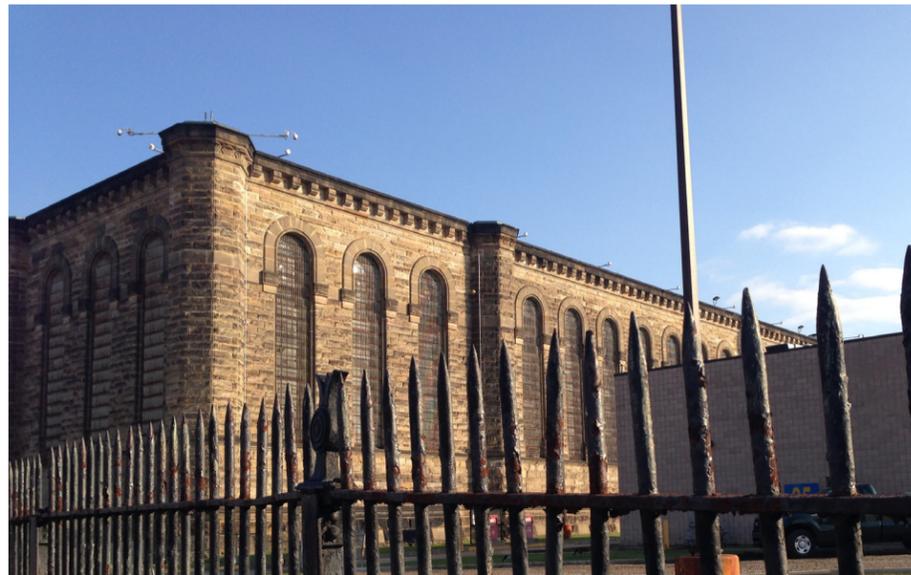


BEHIND BARS: OUR VISIT TO SCI PITTSBURGH

Our visit to the State correctional Institution (SCI) was a truly unique and enlightening experience. Although it would have been helpful to visit at an earlier stage of the project, we were able to learn a great deal about how the prison operates, the living conditions of the inmates, and the general prison layout. SCI is primarily used for inmates who need to complete therapy or training programs. The school offers studies in various crafts and there are volunteer-run AA and NA programs. We met with the assistant to the superintendent, the principle of the prison school, the librarian, and the director of programming. Each of them provided great insight into not just their tasks and relations with the inmates, but also their perspective on the feasibility and logistics of a potential garden and horticulture program.

SCI is currently focusing on becoming accredited with the American Correctional Association (ACA), which will culminate with an inspection next year. The ACA outlines specific policies and regulations that the prison must be accountable for or else they are liable for inmate lawsuits regarding things like air quality or amount of cell space. A garden/horticulture program could definitely play a positive role in SCI's goal to become accredited.

The employees we spoke with were enthusiastic about developing a garden but the lack of adequate green space proved to be a barrier. They suggested pursuing the project at the Mercer County Prison where they already have gardening contests and flowerbeds. The program director also pointed out the issue of working around the union; giving the task of running a garden or teaching a horticulture class would not be in any job description of current employees.



While the focus of our project is on lowering recidivism rates and providing inmates with employment opportunities post-release, the program director was more interested in developing a garden for "special needs inmates" (i.e. any prisoner with mental or behavioral problems). She thought that gardening would be a solid therapeutic option for them and something that the prison currently does not offer.

We were encouraged to learn that gardening tool safety would not be as much of an issue as we initially anticipated. All of the classrooms that require the use of tools are checked three times a day and the tools are organized along a wall so that each tool and its location are visible at all times. When not in use, the tool cage is locked. It also seemed that monetary resources would not be much of a problem either. The program director and the assistant to the superintendant alluded several times that there was a healthy budget for programs, activities, and library materials. We were also encouraged when we read through the food menu of the week. SCI offers two different protein options per meal and incorporate fresh food whenever possible. Since the employees cannot bring in their own food, they eat the same lunch as the inmates, with the addition of a salad bar option.

Just being around the inmates was fascinating enough. We were allowed to walk into two different cells, observe inmates during outdoor time in the yard, and learn about their daily routine. We are excited to reflect more on our experience at SCI. We were thrilled with how receptive everyone was to our program concept and we look forward to possibly pursuing it further.



SCI PITTSBURGH IS HOME TO ROUGHLY 1,800 INMATES RANGING FROM AGE 18 TO MEN WHO DIE OF OLD AGE WHILE STILL IN PRISON.

SCI IS A LOW SECURITY PRISON; MOST OF THE INMATES ARE IN ON DRUG RELATED CHARGES AND THEIR ARE A FEW MEN SERVING LIFE SNEATNCES.

THE INMATES ARE COUNTED 7 TIMES EVERY DAY.

EACH CELL HOLDS 2 INMATES AND EACH IS ALLOWED 4 CARBOARD BOXES OF PERSONAL BELONGINGS. MOST INAMTES HAVE PURCHASED A TV AND THEY CAN PAY FOR CABLE.

THE INMATES WORK AT THE PRISON AND ARE PAID AN HOURLY WAGE OF AROUND 24 CENTS AN HOUR. THEY SPEND THEIR MONEY ON THINGS LIKE FOOD AND TOOTHPASTE AT THE COMMISARY. MANY SEND MONEY TO THEIR FAMILIES

WHILE WERE VISITNG, AN NEW INMATE WAS BEING MOVED TO THE RESTRICTED HOUSING UNIT. HE WAS HANDCUFFED AND ACCOMPANIED BY SEVERAL CORRECTIONS OFFICERS. THE ENTIRE PROCESS WAS TAPED BY A CORRECTIONS OFFICER.

THE SCHOOL OFFERS A SERVICE IN WHICH AN INAMTE CAN FILM HIMSELF READING A CHILDREN'S BOOK ALLOWED. A DVD IS MADE AND A COPY OF IT ALONG WITH THE BOOK IS SENT TO THE INMATE'S CHILD SO THAT THEY CAN WATCH THEIR DAD READ WITH THEM AND FOLLOW ALONG.

COMPUTER ACCESS IS RESTRICTED SO MANY OF THE INMATES BECOME EXTREMELY PROFIENT ON THE TYPEWRITER.