

On July 12-13, 2019, AFSC Michigan hosted the Ending Perpetual Punishment Convening at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. The convening was attended by 67 activists and community organizers from across 13 states and the District of Columbia. The first day of the convening was focused on getting to know the people in the room, and what attendees wanted to get out of the convening, and perhaps most importantly, bringing in voices from incarcerated individuals through a recording of folks incarcerated in Michigan prisons.

In the lead up to the Ending Perpetual Punishment Convening, AFSC Michigan solicited letters and taped phone responses from individuals across state prisons in the Michigan Department of Corrections, seeking answers to questions about fears and concerns upon release, how to create safe communities without perpetual punishment, and how to change public perceptions regarding the efficacy and humanity of long-term incarceration. Each of the individuals quoted in this piece is currently imprisoned in the state of Michigan. Primarily, the goal was to bring the voices of incarcerated people into the space of the convening--to provide a forum for folks who are inside and are directly impacted to have power and a say in moving the needle on the future of their freedom and the freedom of people who come after them.

“Criminal justice reform cannot be accomplished in substantial and sustainable ways by bringing together everyone except the people the reform is supposedly crafted to assist,” said Lacino Hamilton. “When we set forth this larger, inclusive vision of fostering a broad and continuing dialogue among all stakeholders, criminal justice reform becomes a process of empowerment and growth for each stakeholder and the collective well being of all.”

Joey Dyer offered that in order to start reducing stigma associated with having served a prison term, what needs to change is the way communities think about incarcerated individuals. “Start talking like we are still part of the community. When you put a child in time out, it doesn’t mean they’re no longer part of the family. Allow prisoners to participate in public group discussions about the different issues that are often discussed without our input.”

Floyd Perkins similarly expressed that broad narratives must change about the purpose of incarceration. “We have to show that incarcerated persons are not throwaway people. Each person is someone’s sister/brother/son/daughter. We need to show the change of those incarcerated and that the people incarcerated are able to and have a desire to rehabilitate.”

Changing hearts and minds requires shifting the way our communities define punishment. “Is [the purpose of imprisonment] to destroy the life of a person who commits a crime or is the correct errant behavior?” Dyer asked.

Hamilton offered a challenge to convening attendees: “In order to imagine a world without prisons, we have to imagine a different world, not just a different criminal justice system. A different way of organizing human interactions. Restorative practices would be a good starting point.”

George Vicuña offered perspective on the benefits of ending life sentences on the day-to-day lives of incarcerated individuals. “Inmates have a better shot at a better life if they have something to look forward to. Cap a long-term sentence will build the morale for transformation and to create urgency to reenter society,” Vicuña said. He also suggested an overall change in mindset was necessary: “There must be a change policy from punishment and retribution so that the prisoner can rejoin society after they’ve served their time.”

Shearod McFarland expanded on a similar theme, underscoring that individuals, communities, and lawmakers in the free world also needed to examine themselves and the conditions they perpetuate. “We put the onus of the so-called defects squarely on the individual, as opposed to looking at the ways in which society has produced this dysfunctional behavior, bad choices, predatory thinking, the overall despair in the individual. We have to always challenge people--we have to challenge these narratives. I mean as individuals. Ultimately, collectively, our desire is to raise consciousness,” McFarland said.

Further, Tashiena Combs, expressed how prison is not about healing or transformation. Rather, it serves to punish and punish. And, “whatever holistic accountability you find in here [prison] is what you sought out for yourself.”

Finally, India Porter challenged all of us in the community to a call to action and for us to really SEE “Some of the amazing people behind bars, to let our voices be heard, and to matter.”

On Friday night, Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, delivered the keynote address entitled, “The Meaning of Life: The Case for Abolishing Life Sentences,” to a standing-room-only crowd. Mauer argued that the substantial increase in life sentences, which has led to 1/7 incarcerated individuals serving life or virtual life (greater than 50-year) sentences, means that lawmakers will need to address issues of excessive sentencing in order to end mass incarceration and ultimately calling for a 20-year cap on all sentences, regardless of offense. Mauer also addressed the fact that life sentences do not keep communities safer, as individuals age out of crime, and are more costly for taxpayers, as it is more expensive to keep an aging and older population incarcerated.

Mauer concluded by offering several incremental advocacy efforts that could be adopted in the meantime, as advocates work toward the twenty-year sentencing cap. Mauer's recommendations included eliminating life without parole, which Mauer argued eliminates hope for a future within incarcerated individuals and closes off the possibility of personal transformation for many, and the introduction of second-look sentencing programs. Mauer noted that New Jersey Senator Cory Booker introduced a bill proposing second-look considerations for anyone who has served 10 years in federal prison, evidencing that these kinds of programs, while still controversial, were gaining traction with legislators.

Mauer's talk was livestreamed and is available at <http://bit.ly/MauerLiveStream>

On Saturday, the attendees split into groups to tackle several big issues facing activists working to end perpetual punishment: life without the possibility of parole, re-entry, front-end sentencing, alternatives to incarceration, hardest cases and mental health, and elderly and sick incarcerated individuals. The groups were asked to consider these issues from the perspectives of legislation, advocacy, and community mobilization. At various points, the groups echoed several of Mauer's recommendations, including a 20-year cap on sentences and depoliticizing the parole process, but groups were also able to dig deep into their proposed resolutions and together offered new suggestions for what to focus on as we left the convening and went back to our individual communities.

Toward the end of the day, the groups reconnected and shared their recommendations with the whole group, providing action-oriented, concrete goals and strategies individuals could take with them into their work. Indeed, some action areas shared by the LWOP group include fighting to remove technical parole violations, which feed the system of recidivism, increased transparency of parole hearings, the elimination of felony murder laws, and the reminder that the re-entry process must begin on day one in prison. To this end, one of the suggestions was to begin addressing the ways in which individuals sentenced to LWOP are excluded from participation in prison programming, including restorative justice programs; these changes would prepare individuals sentenced to LWOP to be able to demonstrate transformation if they became eligible for second-look sentencing programs or commutations. Several groups also recommended fighting to get people onto parole boards who want to decrease the prison population and doing direct parole-hearing-preparation work as part of direct advocacy. One of these groups--the group focused on elderly and sick incarcerated individuals--reminded the larger group that legislators are unaware of many specific prison conditions and thus stressed the importance of getting state and local lawmakers into prisons and to begin the process of educating them in person. Ultimately, they reminded us that our goal must be to get individuals out of prison and to get them out quickly; don't let this important focus get lost in other parts of this tricky, political work.

In this vein, the front-end sentencing group put forth ideas focused on the importance of decreasing sentence lengths, which remove one barrier to getting individuals out of prison quickly. The group's recommendations included eliminating sentence enhancements, including repeat-offender enhancements, stacking charges, and mandatory minimums; eliminating truth-in-sentencing legislation; and creating and supporting diversion programs for drug charges, gun charges, and domestic violence.

The re-entry group held the concerns of incarcerated individuals at the center of their small-group work at the convening. Transition and re-entry struggles played a huge role in the responses AFSC received from incarcerated folks, and most of the respondents mentioned fears about stigma they would face in their communities upon release. India Porter stated that her biggest desire would be "[t]o enter the community and not have to apologize or explain away my existence because of my past," and Joey Dyer agreed. "My biggest concern has always been being 'welcomed home' as the man I'm becoming and not as the boy I was when I committed my crime. The community has to be willing to receive the 'new man' and become a source of positive reinforcement. Often that requires the community to examine their own thinking regarding rehabilitation and transformation and 'forgiveness,'" Dyer said.

The recommendations of the group included that re-entry must be tailored to the unique needs of particular populations and the individual must be a meaningful part of reentry decisions, creating co-mentorship relationship programs pairing individuals on the inside and outside, and focusing on mobilizing communities around the idea that recidivism is a failure of the community. While promoting success stories is an important media strategy, the group also advocated rewriting the media narrative to include that the community and the system have a responsibility to support re-entry; the community must be seen as an accountable partner in ensuring that returning individuals succeed upon release. A community's recidivism rate is a reflection of successes or failures of the community to welcome and support returning individuals. Some specific mobilizing in neighborhoods include welcome home events, re-entry fairs following a "job fair" model (with jobs, housing, and healthcare services all present), and canvassing. Two important legislative strategies the group recommended include a campaign to promote mentorship opportunities between formerly incarcerated individuals and returning citizens, thus removing the barriers that prevent peer interactions where relevant, in addition to advocacy for signing individuals up for federally sponsored medicaid/medicare programs.

After the re-entry group prompted attendees to engage in community-level self-reflection, the hardest cases and mental health group asked us to think about individual self-reflection as well. As they argued, there are no material limitations on how we deal with hard cases--

these limitations all come from our beliefs about other people, the system, and what kinds of individuals are worthy of attention or capable of change. The group underscored that prison is a punishment-based system and advocated adopting a messaging strategy for dealing with parole boards that acknowledges both that people need to be held accountable for their actions and that individuals coming up for parole have already been deeply punished by the state; at the same time, advocates and the parole board also believe that individuals must be given a chance to move on now that they are ready to lead a positive and productive life. The group advocated for intensive parole preparation and building relationships with people in prison, as the relationships with individuals who are incarcerated is more important than meta-narratives about prison. Deep parole preparation is one time during which it is possible to form these relationships. The group was clear that while abolition might be the ultimate goal, if the current release system relies on parole, then incarcerated individuals need the language and skills to be able to navigate the current system as it stands in order to be released.

The alternatives to incarceration group asked us to widen our hearts and minds. They laid out transformational example of communities who, together, decided that law enforcement, the courts, state control, or a caged reality would not be the state institutions that were called upon when deep harm was acted out towards others in their communities. They focused on the best way to resolve harms as long-term journeys that must be met with scaffolding from many community members, the harmed party, and the person who caused harm. They fixated on accountability and healing rather than punishment and vengeance. The glossary they worked from is indicative of the shift in thinking and narrative needed to truly move toward non-punitive responses to serious harms (including murder and rape) in our communities:

- Instead of *victim*, let's use survivor, harmed party, crime survivor
- Instead of *crime*, let's use harm, which is a manifestation of trauma
- Instead of *cages*, we want spaces of accountability

The group walked us through an idea of how these communities of care would actually function should a terrible and heinous thing happen in their space. They helped us think outside of our traditional ways of seeing and being--they helped us move toward imagining a world without prisons.

As a group, the following resolutions and themes were agreed upon as a national platform to work toward and to serve as a focus for advocacy efforts: a 20-year sentencing cap for all offenses; no carve-outs; well-supported leadership from directly impacted individuals and their families; using direct language as much as possible, including calling a "life without the possibility of parole" sentencing what it is--death by incarceration; eliminating

sentence enhancements and mandatory minimums; centering the “hard” cases; and fighting for retroactivity in all legislation.









